

THE AULD AYRSHIRE OF ROBERT BURNS



BY T. E. HENDERSON



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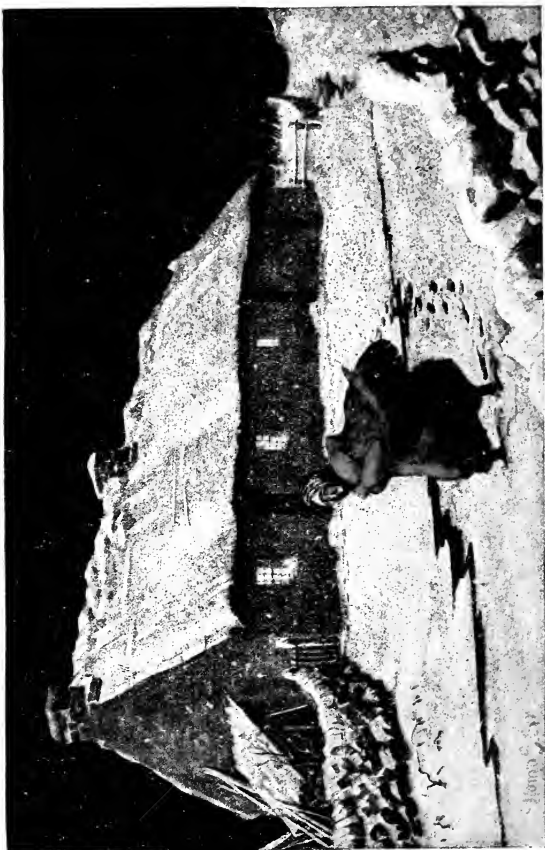
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THE COTTAGE AT ALLOWAY, WHERE BURNS WAS BORN

From a Painting by Mouro S. Orr

'THERE was a lad was born in Kyle,
But whatna day o' whatna style,
I doubt it's hardly worth the while
To be sae nice wi' Robin.

Our monarch's hindmost year but aye,
Was five-and-twenty days begun,
'Twas then a blast of Janwar' win'
Blew hansom in on Robin.

He'll hae misfortunes great and sma',
But aye a heart aboon them a';
He'll be a credit till us a';
We'll a' be proud o' Robin.'

The
AULD AYRSHIRE
OF
ROBERT BURNS

BY

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21

CHAPTER CONTENTS



I. THE SPHERE OF BURNS AS POET	<i>Page</i> 1
II. AYR AND ALLOWAY	24
III. AT MOUNT OLIPHANT	51
IV. LOCHLEA AND TARBOLTON, ETC.	73
V. MOSSGIEL, MAUCHLINE, AND KIL- MARNOCK	108
INDEX	142



I L L U S T R A T I O N S

Specially Painted for "The Auld Ayrshire of Robert Burns"
by *Monro S. Orr, the Glasgow Artist*



The Cottage at Alloway, where Burns was born	<i>Frontispiece</i> ✓
	PAGE
The Tam o' Shanter Inn, Ayr	16 ✓
The Auld Brig, Ayr	32 ✓
Alloway's Auld Haunted Kirk	48
Mount Oliphant	64
The Auld Brig o' Doon	80
The Old Masonic Lodge at Tarbolton	96
Mary Morison's House, Mauchline	112
Nanse Tinnock's	128
Poosie Nansie's at Mauchline	136



THE AULD AYRSHIRE OF ROBERT BURNS

I

THE SPHERE OF BURNS AS POET

It is now nearing one hundred and fifty years, since, on a stormy 25th of January, two obscure Scottish peasants, in their frail clay-built cottage at Alloway in Ayrshire, were made happy by the birth of their first child—a son whose name was to be famous and wonderful, as that of the chief poet of his native land, and one of the most remarkable bards of all time. As regards its parentage genius is of course independent of rank or station; it is a gift of nature and not of circumstances, and the complex laws of heredity that determine its production are beyond our ken; but in how many instances has genius, from lack of scope and opportunity, remained hidden and ‘inglorious’! A peasant’s circumstances and occupation can hardly be

deemed favourable for its culture. His wants are simple, his daily tasks only faintly exercise his intellect, and their monotonous round tends to dull his imagination and deaden his aspirations.

The rude clay cottage of an obscure country clachan, was, thus, a most unlikely place for the birth of a poet so world-famed as Burns; and it was unlikely to the verge of incredibility that poetic achievements of such merit should be accomplished by one who was still a toiling peasant. Of course, with the impediments which he shared in common with peasants in general, he possessed certain advantages in being a Scottish peasant; and he was also the son of an exceptionally intelligent father; but, making allowance for special favouring influences, there is in his triumph a certain uniqueness that awakens in a peculiar manner both our sympathy and our wonder. However we may account for that triumph, it must be held to betoken an immense native endowment, a quite exceptional irrepressibility.

In endeavouring to realise the actual situation and circumstances of Burns, we

are met of course, at the outset, by the difficulty that the Ayrshire into which he was born was an Ayrshire which had not come under the spell of his enchantment. Several generations of Scots have now been nurtured on his poems and songs; the subtle influences of his remarkable genius have been partly absorbed into the nation's life, and have assisted to broaden the peasant's thoughts and to sweeten and civilise his social sentiments. The Ayrshire of a hundred and fifty years ago was an Ayrshire which had not yet experienced the thrill of joining in that great anthem of good fellowship, 'Auld Lang Syne;' whose ideas of manly independence had not found expression and ratification in the boldly truculent, 'A man's a man for a' that;' which had not been subjected to the wholesome castigation of such mirth-provoking, yet penetrating, satires as 'The Holy Fair,' and 'Holy Willie's Prayer;' and which was still unblessed by the quickening effects of the many-sided sympathy, which is the pervading element of most of the Bard of Coila's verse.

We must therefore begin by admitting that the ascendancy of Burns over subse-

quent generations increases our difficulty in understanding the exact character of his circumstances and surroundings—this apart from the processes of change, which are the inevitable consequence of the lapse of time. Yet it is possible to exaggerate the dimensions of the gulf that separates his generation from ours; for after all, marvellous genius though he was, he was, in a sense, the ripe fruit of the preceding generations; and his success would neither have been so immediate and considerable as it was, nor so abiding as it has been, had the general tone and sentiment of his verse not been in harmony with the general tendency of the nation's aspiration, and the influences that were furthering its intellectual and social progress.

The age of Burns was an age of advancement towards more enlightened liberty, intellectually, ecclesiastically, socially, and politically; and his poetry voiced the spirit of that advancement. The Kirk still continued to exercise an authority over the people which appealed rather to their superstition than their intelligence—an authority which, in the case of most, would now be deemed intolerably tyrannical.

nical; but there was already, amongst both clergy and people, a widespread sentiment of revolt against the more rigid and violent tenets of the old Puritanic creed. It is this sentiment of revolt which, directly or indirectly, animates much of the verse of Burns: to this it owed both some of its most peculiar moral merits and its occasional moral defects, and much of its immediate vogue. It was largely an assertion of the claims of what may be termed the secular side of human nature to fair consideration: a protest against the ancient assumption of the essential cursedness of the present world, and that rigidly serious conception of human conduct, which instead of seeking to distinguish between the use and abuse of the arts that minister to enjoyment, tended to place mere recreation and amusement under a kind of ban. For combating this ancient ecclesiastical moroseness, humour was perhaps the most effective weapon, and seldom has humour been employed more effectively than in the ecclesiastical satires of Burns.

When Burns appeared upon the scene, the reaction had already begun to set in. The

THE AULD AYRSHIRE

excessively repressive character of the Kirk's enactments was bound in the end to create it; but towards its creation the Kirk had also directly assisted by cultivating so sedulously, though within somewhat narrow limits, the intelligence of the people. Whatever the mistakes and faults of its policy, it is undeniable that it had at heart what it deemed the people's best welfare. If its aims in regard to their enlightenment were narrow, its purpose was at least earnest and sincere. It had a system of parochial education, which notwithstanding great variations in its practical efficiency, was, on the whole, perhaps in advance of that in any other country of Europe; and this secular education was supplemented by a systematic doctrinal training and instruction from which no one was permitted to be exempt until deemed fit to become a communicant of the Kirk. On every adult of the parish attendance had also, until lately, been obligatory at the parish kirk. There the parishioners listened to long doctrinal and hortatory harangues, which, preposterous and extravagant though in certain respects they might be, appealed, in a manner, to

their understanding and conscience, as well as to their terrors and superstitions. On the whole those addresses tended to promote thought and reflection, and once thought and reflection are provoked, it is difficult to assign a limit to their action. So much for the causes of the reaction created directly or indirectly by the policy of the Kirk. Co-operating therewith were a variety of outside influences, which were gradually emancipating both clergy and people from the narrow and more pedantic notions of the previous centuries. The new era of invention and industrial progress had begun to show signs of its arrival, and widening commercial intercourse was assisting to introduce more practical and common-sense notions regarding duty and conduct. New ideas as to human liberty had also begun to dawn upon the world, and it was becoming more and more difficult to interfere with the right of private judgment. Moreover, the splendid literature of England had begun to cast its spell over the Scottish intellect. The old hide-bound ecclesiastical literature was now threatened with formidable rivalry, and the period of the

nation's obsession by it was drawing to a close.

Finally, the Kirk's domination, despotic and absolute as it might seem to be, had, as regards the bulk of the people, been always, perhaps, more ostensible than real. In its palmiest days the Kirk had never quite conquered the heart of the nation. The causes of its peculiar ascendancy were largely fortuitous. It was itself the product of a reaction, and its aims were too inflexible, too one-sided, too austere to commend them to the nation's permanent acceptance. As regards the generality of the people, it never really subdued the old immemorial superstitions; and amongst the bulk of them ancient pagan ideas and sentiments, which had survived during the Catholic ages, were still left unmastered by Christianity—'Nature and Nature's laws' work out their ends only by slow and gradual processes, and if rashly and violently interfered with, are certain, sooner or later, to manifest resentment. Even among many of the more devout, the natural healthy instincts for recreation demanded a fuller outlet than was consistent with the strictness of Puri-

tan gravity; and the need of diversion, if interfered with in one direction was certain to assert itself in another. While exercising a certain influence over the conduct and habits of the community, the Kirk's control suffered from narrowness of outlook and insufficient enlightenment. It left largely out of account a whole world of sentiment and emotion—the sentiment and emotion which is the outcome of general social intercourse, of the varied practical experiences of life, and of contact with the sights and sounds of external nature.

Under the auspices of the Kirk, the noble succession of the old Scottish poets had come suddenly to a close. All secular verse—all verse that did not echo in some form the doctrines of Protestant theology, that was not stamped with the Kirk's image and superscription—came under taboo; the old popular songs had been, in a manner, and for a time, superseded by devout parodies of them, entitled 'The Gude and Godly Ballats'; prose literature concerned itself only with theological and ecclesiastical themes; and Scotland ceased to have a native literature worthy of the

name; but the predilection for the old ballads and songs was not eliminated from the hearts of the people; and though, for some generations, none of them were circulated in print, many of them were preserved in rude traditional forms. Some time before the arrival of Burns the Puritan rigour in regard to the old native literature had become relaxed; and with the increasing appreciation of the literature of England a revived interest in the old vernacular verse had been awakened through the exertions of Allan Ramsay and others.

Various circumstances had thus created for Burns his peculiar opportunity. Had he been born a few centuries earlier, he would not have had the same sphere for the exercise of his special genius, and no such sufficient incentive to exercise it. Even could he have obtained circulation for his verse, the nation would not have been in the same mood to welcome it as it was towards the close of the eighteenth century. Great, also, as was the native vigour of his genius, his poetry was, necessarily, influenced by the special circumstances of his own time; and but for the

old poetic tradition to which he fell heir, it would, also, have lacked some of its most characteristic qualities, and could hardly have appealed, with quite the same effect, to the heart of the Scottish nation.

For the attainment of his illustrious position as the national poet of Scotland, Burns was also greatly indebted to his peasant circumstances — circumstances which, in the case of one less remarkably dowered than he, might have been actually disqualifying. As it was, his peasanthood endowed him with qualifications for his special rôle which were possessed neither by Ramsay nor Fergusson, even had they approached him in genius. Exceptionally gifted though he was, he shared the peasant's appreciation of the simple, ingenuous sentiments of the old ballads and songs. Through his peasant's heart the old Scottish poetic traditions made a more direct appeal to him than otherwise they would have done; and though his acquaintance with the classic models of England greatly benefited his poetic taste, and made him a much more intelligent, refined and accomplished artist than he

THE AULD AYRSHIRE

otherwise could have been, it was mainly by the delineation of his own peasant circumstances and experiences that he enabled his countrymen and the world to recognise

‘the boundless store

Of charms that nature to her votaries
yields.’

Except when he occasionally—and mistakenly—essayed English verse, Burns attempted no direct, deliberate studies of the aspects and features of nature, and essayed no detailed poetic landscapes. He recognised that, as he himself expressed it, he could not

‘show

To paint with Thomson’s landscape
glow.’

The allusions to scenery and to the moods and aspects of nature in his verse are for the most part incidental. They help to give it colour and vitality, or to illustrate and vivify his passing thoughts and sentiments; and they are introduced seemingly without effort and almost casually. By virtue of his constant familiarity with nature, they occurred to him as spontaneously as they would to any other peasant,

although, of course, the instinctive art of the genius and poet is manifest in the manner of their introduction and in the vivid picturesqueness of their use. A peasant's as well as a poet's keen sympathetic appreciation of nature is expressed in the following stanza of his 'Epistle to William Simson':

'O Nature! a' thy shows and forms
To feeling, pensive hearts hae charms,
Whether the summer kindly warms
 Wi' life and light;
Or winter howls in gusty storms
 The lang, dark night.'

Great as was the poetic susceptibility of Burns, and admirable as was his gift of terse expression, his incidental allusions to nature and animal life owe much of their vivid reality, and some of their most felicitous and characteristic touches, to the fact that he was a peasant. 'In order to produce a picturesque effect in poetry'—wrote Scott, in reply to the suggestion of Warren Hastings that he should make 'the gallant Nelson' the subject of a lay—'a very intimate knowledge of the subject described is an essential requisite.' Had he sought for an illustration of this theory he could

have found none more apt than the poetry of Burns, which—especially his vernacular verse—is unsurpassed for vivid picturesqueness, picturesqueness derived from knowledge so thorough and detailed that, with genius to inspire him, it supplied him with material for his effects almost spontaneously. How minutely and admirably observed, and how exquisitely picturesque the description of the idiosyncrasies and diversions of Cæsar and Luath in the introduction to the confabulation of ‘The Twa Dogs’! How redolent of peasant associations the flow of half-melancholy, half-humorous reminiscences in ‘Poor Mailie’s Elegy’! And what a wealth of peasant experience, knowledge and sympathy are enshrined in every verse of that, after its own fashion, quite matchless ‘Address of the Auld Farmer to his Auld Mare Maggie’! Compared with the masterly touches of Burns’ portrait of the auld farmer and his mare, Tennyson’s witty sketch of the ‘Northern Farmer’ seems perfunctory and superficial. For the accomplishment of the one portrait genius was aided by the peculiar knowledge, sympathy and appreciation of the peasant’s

son; the other, with all its cleverness, is only half true. It is mainly ironic, and this because it is informed by imperfect knowledge and sympathy—the knowledge and sympathy of one who, with all his acute poetic instinct, was, in this case, mainly an outside observer of certain class peculiarities. ‘The Northern Farmer’ is, in truth, little more than a poetical *jeu d’esprit*, and hardly ranks in estimating the character of Tennyson’s genius. ‘The Auld Farmer,’ on the other hand, has more than plausible claims to rank as the masterpiece of Burns, notwithstanding the brilliancy of such achievements as ‘The Jolly Beggars’ and ‘Tam o’ Shanter.’ It touches himself more nearly than they do, it expresses his peasant heart in a manner that they necessarily do not do, it sounds a deeper note, and its humour is of a finer kind, because it is in closer association with

‘the true pathos and sublime

Of human life.’

But it is not merely in set pieces—as in those now mentioned and several others that might be quoted—dealing with specific peasant themes, that Burns reveals



THE AULD AYRSHIRE

the peculiarly intimate knowledge of nature possessed by the discerning peasant; this knowledge is manifested continually in the character of his incidental allusions, in his vivid epithets and phrases, and occasionally, in short descriptions, which seem to suggest themselves to him spontaneously and almost irresistibly. It is hardly necessary to mention the exquisite stanza on the rocky woodland stream in 'Halloween.' Here we have a poetic picture, with every detail of which the poet had been lovingly familiar, perhaps earlier than he could remember :

' Whyles owre a linn the burnie plays,
As thro' the glen it wimpl't;
Whyles round a rocky scaur it strays;
Whyles in a wiel it dimpl't;
Whyles glitter'd to the nightly rays,
Wi' bickerin', dancin' dazzle;
Whyles cookit underneath the braes,
Below the spreading hazel,
Unseen that night.'

Much less elaborate in detail, but quite as vivid in effect, and because it has to do with sentient life, appealing less to our fancy and more to our human sentiments, is the following winter scene :

THE AULD AYRSHIRE

‘Listening the doors an’ winnocks rattle,
I thought me on the ourie cattle,
Or silly sheep, wha bide this brattle
O’ winter war,
And thro’ the drift, deep-lairing sprattle
Beneath a scaur.’

An even still more expressively emotional note is struck in the following stanza, where the gloomy signs of the oncoming of a stormy night are made to symbolise the dark forebodings of the poet at the prospect of being compelled to leave his native land:

‘The gloomy night is gath’ring fast,
Loud roars the wild inconstant blast;
Yon murky cloud is filled with rain,
I see it driving o’er the plain;
The hunter now has left the moor,
The scattered coveys meet secure;
While here I wander, prest with care
Along the lonely banks of Ayr.’

But all the three stanzas have this in common—they breathe the deep sympathetic interest in the scenes of nature, to be acquired only by constant communion with it. These pictures, painted by the vivid art of genius, had already unconsciously impressed themselves upon

the poet's mental retina in the course of his everyday experiences. Every stroke expressed what he fully knew and felt, and the whole impression indicates a justness and completeness of appreciation that is beyond criticism.

But it is as much in lines and phrases and epithets, as in stanzas or set poems, that the intimate peasant knowledge of Burns reveals itself. Here are a few examples of its incidental use to add life and picturesqueness to his narrative, or to supply him with an apt comparison :

'The hares were hirplin' down the furs' [in the early morning]; 'The thresher's weary flingin'-tree'; 'An' heard the restless rattons squeak about the riggin'; 'A ratton rattled up the wa'; 'When lyart leaves bestrew the yird'; 'When winds rave thro' the naked tree'; 'And partricks scraichin' loud at e'en'; 'Ye curlews calling through a cloud, ye whistling plover'; 'The kye stood rowtan i' the loan'; 'Ye [the deil] like a rash buss stood in sight, wi' weaving sough'; 'Awa ye squattered like a drake on whistling wings,' etc.

The truth is that the peasanthood of Burns enters into the very fibre of his

THE AULD AYRSHIRE

verse, into its every tone and manner. It is this which communicates to it its specially piquant charm, as compared with the verse of such nature poets as those of the highly accomplished and semi-philosophical lake school, where nature and simplicity assume the form of a cult. Less subtle, less idealistic, ruder, more homely, more plain-spoken than they, he is at the same time more picturesque, much more broadly humorous, truer, stronger, more graphic and realistic. He indulges little in meditative musings, or exalted raptures, or when he does, the virtue goes out of him; he mainly utters with passionate sincerity, or humorous mirth, his peasant observations, thoughts and emotions, and relates with vivid fidelity what as a peasant he has seen and experienced, and therefore thoroughly knows. To know peasant life as he knew it, and to describe it as he has described it, implied, of course, that he was quite an exceptional peasant. He had a very special poetic training, he possessed considerable book-lore, he was gifted with a quite marvellous insight into men and things, and with a poetic genius and skill which are the possession

of only the elect of the human race; but with all he was by birth, descent and circumstances, at heart a peasant, and he expressed himself with most significance, and in the highest terms of his art, when he expressed himself so to speak in peasant terms.

Nor except when, following the advice of certain learned mentors, he intermittently essayed to imitate the methods of the classic English poets—and his models here were too frequently the pompously frigid and modishly artificial versifiers of the eighteenth century—did he seek to go outside his own experience for a subject. He attempts no ideal or mystical romances. He in fact avoids almost every kind of idealism, and his references even to history are little more than incidental, if we except the rapturous ‘Scots wha hae.’ His standpoint is mainly that of the shrewd, observant, warm-hearted and passionate peasant. His theme is virtually the peasant Ayrshire within the limits of his personal experience; the life he depicts is that of its rough and homely farms, and its poor and squalid villages; those whose adventures he relates, whom he

addresses, or eulogises or satirises being those whom he knew, were few of them known beyond the bounds of Ayrshire, while the majority were of very humble station, and some of them of by no means reputable life and conversation; the incidents he celebrates are founded on what he himself has experienced or observed, or on traditions of his native district; most of his love lyrics have a distinctly rustic setting; and in general it may be affirmed that while his genius is stamped with a universality which makes an appeal to every rank and station, and secures for it appreciation in every country and clime where white men congregate, its universal appeal is due to the fact that he has represented with adequate depth and fidelity the microcosm within his own ken. His experiences were as varied and complete as his peasant sphere permitted them to be; the good and the bad, and all the varied idiosyncrasies of human nature within his own sphere were to him an open book; and his merit lies in the vividness, picturesqueness and truth with which he has depicted life as he lived and knew it in his native Coila. Coila was the

Muse to which he professed to owe his
inspiration: she it was who taught him

‘Manners-painting strains,

The loves, the ways of simple swains.’

And it was Coila which he more particularly aspired to celebrate in his verse:—

‘Auld Coila, now, may fidge fu’ fain,

She’s gotten bardies o’ her ain;

Chiels wha their chanter’s winna hain,

But tune their lays,

Till echoes a’ resound again

Her weel-sung praise.’

II

AYR AND ALLOWAY

THE chief charm of Kyle or Coila, the central district of Ayrshire, is its wooded hollows and its rocky streams. In the uplands the view is extensive in all directions, but possesses no striking features except towards the sea with the picturesque Arran mountains. The eastern portion consists mainly of bleak and bare moorland country rising into stretches of rounded hills of no great altitude; and the cultivated lower ground though pleasantly undulating is lacking in variety and interest but for the fringes of wood along the banks of the rivers and streams. It is a typical agricultural country of the less romantic districts of western lowland Scotland; and with the general absence of fences and enclosures, the larger proportion of boggy and uncultivated land, and the generally mean and tawdry character of the farm buildings, the country in the time of Burns must have presented a

THE AULD AYRSHIRE

more uninviting appearance than it does now. But every country has its own peculiar attractions for those born and bred in it; for them it has a secret fascination which no stranger is able properly to appraise; its presence is associated with much that is dearest to them in life; even when it ceases to be the theatre of their daily experiences it continues to haunt their dreams, and to assert itself as the life companion of their souls. It is with enthusiastic appreciation that Burns refers to

‘Auld Coila’s plains an’ fells,
Her moors red-brown with heather
bells,
Her banks and braes, her dens and
dells.’

And while his fancy was chiefly captivated by its woods and haughs, and its verdant summer scenes, its barer and bleaker aspects also powerfully appealed to certain of his moods:

‘O sweet are Coila’s haughs an’ woods
When lint - whites chant amang the
buds,
And jinkin’ hares, in amorous whids,
Their loves enjoy:

THE AULD AYRSHIRE

While thro' the braes the cushat croods
With wailfu' cry!

Ev'n winter bleak has charms to me,
When winds rave thro' the naked tree;
Or frosts on hills of Ochiltree
Are hoary gray;

Or blinding drifts wild-furious flee,
Dark'ning the day!'

It has been noted by Keats and others as rather remarkable that though Burns spent his boyhood within reach of the sea, lived most of his years within view of it, and was resident for several months in the seacoast towns of Ayr and Irvine, the sea is but sparingly alluded to in his verse. That he was not insensible to its fascination we learn from the address of the Muse of Coila to him in 'The Vision':

'I saw thee seek the sounding shore,
Delighted with the dashing roar.'

In 'Had I a cave' he further declares:

'Had I a cave
On some wild distant shore
Where the winds howl
To the waves' dashing roar,
There would I weep my woes,' etc.

In 'The Brigs of Ayr' we have also this vivid picture of still midnight:

‘The tide-swollen firth with sullen-sounding roar,
Thro’ the still night dash’d hoarse along the shore;
All else was hush’d as Nature’s closèd e’e,’ etc.

Here, moreover, is another seascape more charged with human sentiment:

‘Along the solitary shore,
Where fleeting sea-fowls round me fly,
Across the rolling, dashing roar
I’ll westwards turn my wistful eye.’

And here is yet another, in two amongst the most mournfully pathetic lines that perhaps poet ever penned:

‘The wan moon is setting behind the white wave,

And Time is setting with me, O.’

But these quotations pretty nearly exhaust all his allusions to the sea that can properly be termed poetic. His most frequent references to it are as merely an impediment to communication, as in ‘Auld Lang Syne’:

‘But seas between us braid hae roared.’
In the general character of his allusions to it there is a monotonous sameness. He did not know its moods and aspects with

THE AULD AYRSHIRE

the same intimacy as he did the rustic scenes of Coila; and of the picturesque grandeur of the peaked Arran mountains, bounding part of the western horizon, he makes no mention.

The Ayrshire country most intimately associated with the life and the verse of Burns is included within the radius of a very few miles. The clay cottage of his birth and early childhood lies about two miles south-east from the town of Ayr; Mount Oliphant is about other two miles south-eastward, and Lochlea and Moss-giel lie about ten and twelve miles respectively to the north-east. Episodes of his life are associated with places somewhat farther afield; especially with the smuggling village of Kirkoswald near the Carrick shore, and the seaport town of Irvine; while he was latterly pretty well acquainted with the 'streets and neuks of Killie,' which on his 'weel-gaun fillie' he was frequently accustomed to visit on market days.

Of town life, such as it then existed in remote and old-world Ayrshire, Burns obtained some impression at a very early period of his existence, for the county

town was little more than two miles distant from Alloway; and such grandeurs as it could show in shops and buildings must have been to him subjects for youthful curiosity and wonder, almost as soon as he began to speculate about the outside world. Amongst his earliest recollections must have been those of his Sunday visits to the parish church, where he listened to 'Dundee's wild-warbling measures,' or 'plaintive Martyrs,' or 'noble Elgin,' sung doubtless with many quavering grace notes and much grating discord, but with a much greater volume of some kind of melodic sound than in the clay cottage at home. The gentle prelections of 'Dalrymple mild,' and the more learned ones of the 'heretic,' though equally amiable, 'Dr Mac, must alike, for some time, have conveyed to his ear much that his infant intellect was unable to assimilate; but the benevolent personalities of the two clergymen were alone fitted beneficially to impress a nature so quick and sensitive. Of Dalrymple he told Ramsay of Ochertyre that his father was so much pleased with his strain of preaching and benevolent conduct that he embraced his re-

ligious opinions, though practically he remained a Calvinist.' Burns, we know, did not remain a Calvinist: indeed he hated Calvinism with his whole mind and heart and soul; and the prosecution of his friend Dr Macgill for heresy, on account of what were deemed Socinian opinions, evoked his warmest scorn towards those he termed the 'rotten-hearted Puritans' of the Presbytery, whose 'heretic blast' he vivaciously burlesqued in the 'Kirk's Alarm.'

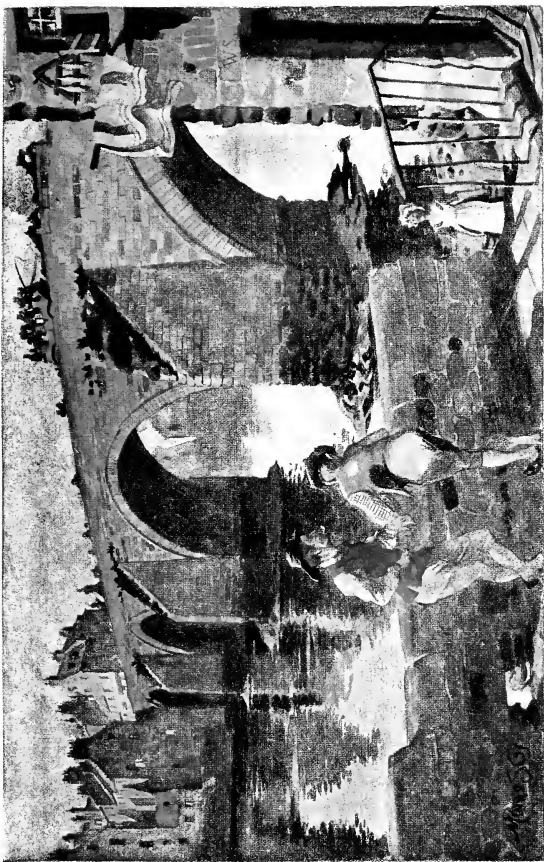
In other than ecclesiastical respects his vicinity to Ayr was, in his youth, so he himself states, of great advantage to him. When the family, in his seventh year, removed to Mount Oliphant he was two additional miles away from it, but he was now quite able to make the longer journey, and his social disposition being, even in his early youth, 'without bounds or limits,' he was quite inclined to utilise every opportunity to visit it that fell in his way. He told Dr Moore of his acquaintanceship there with 'other yonkers who possessed superior advantages' and who lent him books to read and helped him to learn French; but we cannot but believe that

he had other interests in the town of a boy's usually miscellaneous character, and that its facilities for diversion were utilised with quite as much eagerness as those for mental improvement. Later he had, of course, occasion often to visit it as man and farmer, even when resident at the more distant Lochlea or Mossgiel. His poetical and social gifts secured him the friendship not only of its two excellent clergymen, but of such prominent citizens as Robert Aiken, solicitor, and surveyor of taxes—the 'Orator Bob' of 'the Kirk's Alarm'—John Ballantyne, banker, and some time provost of the burgh, lawyer Willie Chalmers, and Major Logan of Park, 'thairm-inspirin,' rattlin' Willie'; and he must also have had a pretty comprehensive acquaintanceship amongst its humbler citizens, besides being, not unfrequently, the life and soul of the companies who foregathered at its inns and hostelries. When market days were wearing late, he probably often left it, if not in the highly primed condition of Tam o' Shanter, at least in as pleasantly exhilarated mood as the 'Auld Farmer' and his mare Maggie:

THE AULD BRIG, AYR

From a Painting by Monroe S. Orr

'*Auld Brig* appear'd of ancient Pictish race,
The very wrinkles Gothic in his face ;
He seem'd as he wi' time had warstl'd lang,
Yet, toughly dour, he bade an unco bang.'



‘When thou was corn’t, and I was
mellow,

We took the road aye like a swallow.’

Of this ‘Auld Ayr,’ the streets of which were paced as boy and man by Burns, almost every outside nook and corner of which was familiar to his eyes, where he diverted himself when a bare-footed and ragged youngster, where later he stood gossiping and joking with its ‘honest men and bonnie lassies,’ and whose inn parlours resounded to the laughter evoked by his humorous sallies, only traces of the mere skeleton remain. The High Street still winds its way over the identical strip of earth it then occupied; but the modern thoroughfare with its electric poles, its tramway lines, and its broad side pavements, is quite a different one from the ancient, roughly cobbled, irregular highway without side walks of any kind. And if the face of the thoroughfare would now be unrecognisable by Burns, it would be quite as difficult for him to identify the street from the character of its buildings. Here and there the eye lights on the thatched roof of a shabbily plain two-storey house; but its humble, antique as-

pect seems quite put out of countenance by the slated pretentiousness of its modern neighbours; and it but faintly assists us in our attempts to conjure up the 'Auld Ayr' of the time of Burns, with its rows of thatched and picturesquely gabled houses, its mean, small-windowed shops, its chapman billies' stands, and its old-world ease and dulness, only stirred into some show of temporary bustle and activity on fair or market days. The High Street of to-day, quite modern in its general aspect, is, it is to be hoped, merely in a transition state towards a more harmonious and beautiful architectural unity; but meanwhile it is less satisfying to the artistic sense than would have been the humble picturesqueness which has been almost entirely effaced. The buildings are provokingly irregular both in height and in their architectural features, and the main effect of their combination is that of heterogeneous confusion; but there is abundant evidence, both in the character of the shops and in the appearance of the passers-by, of comfort and prosperity; for the street is now the business and shopping centre of a town that has increased more

than tenfold in population since the time of Burns, and is now a sort of miniature Glasgow, or Greenock, or Paisley, with the additional advantages of sea-bathing, and, in the immediate neighbourhood, of quite an *embarras des riches*, in the choice of golf courses.

Of the inns frequented by the poet, that now named the 'Tam o' Shanter' is apparently the sole survivor. It is substantially the same old inn at the blazing ingle of whose parlour the poet imagines Tam as 'planted right,' with Souter Johnnie 'at his elbow,' and bowls of 'reaming swats' before them; but the environment of the inn is as completely changed as the dress and appearance of its frequenters, and even the remains of the old gateway of the town, which conferred on the hostelry a certain antique dignity, have long been removed.

Such prominent features of the town as towers and steeples have, of course, multiplied with the growth of the population and the increase of denominational meeting-houses; but the two immortalised in 'The Brigs of Ayr' no longer survive, the 'drowsy steeple clock' of the old Tolbooth

THE AULD AYRSHIRE

having ceased to number the hours of the day in 1826, and its clock and bells having been transferred to a new and loftier Wallace Tower, erected in 1834. On the site of the old horse fair now stands the lonely-looking statue of the Bard himself, amid parterres of flowers, and fronting the showy railway station and hotel—a strangely old-world, agricultural figure to be found in such a conventionally urban situation; and, doubtless, did it suddenly become endowed with animation, it would be a little puzzled to know where it was, or to find its way to Lochlea or Mossgiel.

The river, of course, runs, as formerly, to the sea, and behaves, when 'in flood, very much as it did in the time of Burns; but the Ratton Key has long ceased to witness 'winter speats,' both it and the larger quay having been superseded by the harbours, docks, and piers suitable for a thriving modern commercial port. The brig which Burns saw when first 'buskit in its braw new coat,' became, by the floods of 1877, a 'shapeless cairn,' as Burns, by the mouth of the Auld Brig, prophesied; but the Auld Brig, almost the sole sur-

viving memento of the Auld Ayr of the poet, has itself, for some years, practically ceased to be a brig; and to prevent it, like its rival, becoming a shapeless cairn, is a problem that is taxing the wits of engineers and architects. Whether it will continue to 'warstle wi' Time' much longer or not, the transforming influence of that agency is abundantly manifest on both banks of the river which it spans; and could we conceive the Bard before the early hours of some winter morning revisiting there the glimpses of the moon, he could hardly realise that the buildings on the King's-Kyle side formed part of the 'ancient burgh of Ayr'; while the modern Newton on the Stewart-Kyle side of the river has quite blotted out of existence the small thatched village of that name, which was blessed by the 'meek and mim' ministrations of 'sairie Willie Water-foot.' But Time has not only completely transformed the 'Auld Ayr' with which Burns was familiar; it has also so extended its boundaries as completely to alter the character of its immediate landmarks. The chief highway to the cottage and the Brig of Doon—the Carrick Road, which had no

existence in the eighteenth century—is lined, almost half way to the cottage, by a constant succession of smart suburban villas, which are succeeded by trim hedges and well-built walls, bounding the well-cultivated fields, where early potatoes are grown for the delectation of the good folks of Glasgow, or fertile grazing grounds trimly adorned with clumps of trees, and browsed on in comfortable content by thriving Highland and Ayrshire cattle. These model agricultural fields and grasslands can only by a great effort of the imagination be identified with the wild, uncultivated moorland that of old bordered the approach to ‘Alloway’s auld haunted kirk,’ where the traveller passed successively the ragged clump of birks and the

‘Meikle stane

Where drunken Charlie brak’s neck
bane,’

the whinny knolls and the cairn,

‘Where hunters found the murder’d
bairn,’

and the solitary

‘thorn abune the well,

Where Mungo’s mother hanged hersel’.

Whatever the truth or falsehood associated with these weird traditions, the scene was entirely in keeping with them; but it is not so now: their memorials have all perished, and left not a wrack behind. Smug respectability and prosperity pervade the whole region from the Auld Brig of Ayr to the Auld Brig of Doon. The ruined Kirk Alloway and the Auld Brig have changed but little since Burns immortalised them, and doubtless will long remain as mementoes of his tale. But it was the creation of quite a different century from ours. Ghaists, howlets, warlocks, and Auld Nick himself, have probably long ceased to scare belated travellers, whether drunk or sober, passing the anciently haunted kirk. If they did still cherish occasional desires to renew their assemblies there, the tramway and the new railway would perhaps be sufficient to convince them of the discretion of selecting a more secluded meeting-place for their unholy revels. With the tramcar passing the 'winnock-bunker in the east,' and railway trains rumbling, however modestly, behind the building, it is no longer a place where such 'unco sights'

THE AULD AYRSHIRE

are to be looked for as those which enriched the eyes of the heroic Tam o' Shanter.

As for the village of Alloway, where the poet first looked upon the world, it also is no longer the Alloway of the poet's days. The old clay cottage has now no neighbours of a similar or a still plainer and more primitive aspect. When first erected, it was probably one of the more pretentious mansions of the rustic clachan; for the poet's father was a man of superior tastes, enlightenment, and aspirations to most of his neighbours, and was so far a man of means that he was able to hire seven acres of nursery ground, and expend the money for the materials, in addition to clay, necessary for the erection of his cottage. Even towards the close of the eighteenth century the mass of the common people of Scotland were housed in hovels no better than those yet to be found in some of the remoter western islands — round, one-roomed stone and turf shanties without chimneys, the smoke from the fire in the centre finding its exit merely by a hole in the apex of the roof. It is, indeed, a somewhat similar, though

two-roomed, dwelling which figures in the Vision; and what the poet professes there to describe is not a mere cotter's hut, but the older, though still common, farmhouse of the period:

'There, lanely, by the ingle-cheek,
I sat and ey'd the spewing reek,
That fill'd, wi' hoast-provoking smeeek,
The auld clay biggin';
An' heard the restless rattons squeak
About the riggin'.'

With a curious oversight in regard to dates, Gilbert Burns was concerned lest some readers might suppose that the poet had here in his mind Alloway cottage, whereas, of course, he left the cottage when only in his seventh year; and it was on an evening in his early manhood, after he had been tired by wielding, the 'lee-lang day,' the 'threshers' weary flingin' - tree,' that he saw, by the ingle lowe,

'Now bleezin' bright,
A tight, outlandish hizzie, braw,
Come full in sight.'

The 'spence' of the Vision must have been meant to represent that either of Lochlea or Mossgiel farmhouse, for he muses thus:

‘Had I to guid advice but harkit,
 I might by this have led a market,
 Or strutted in a bank, and clarkit
 My cash-account;
 While here, half-mad, half-fed, half-
 sarkit,
 Is a’ th’ amount.’

It is rather remarkable that Gilbert, in his anxiety to vindicate the taste and ability of his father as architect and builder, entirely overlooks other possibilities; and thus, while affirming that, as regards its application to the cottage, his brother’s description is a mere fancy picture, he does not stay to consider whether it could in any way apply to one of the farmhouses.

Here, however, is what he does say about the cottage—he is writing to Dr Currie: ‘That you may not think too meanly of this house, or of my father’s taste in building, by supposing the poet’s description in the Vision (which is entirely a fancy picture) applicable to it, allow me to take notice to you, that the house consisted of a kitchen in one end, and a room in the other, with a fireplace and chimney; that my father had constructed a concealed

bed in the kitchen, with a small closet at the end, of the same materials with the house, and when altogether cast over, outside and in, with lime, it had a neat, comfortable appearance, such as no family of the same rank, in the present improved style of living, would think themselves ill lodged in.'

Gilbert wrote, be it remembered, nearly fifty years after the cottage was erected, and even then he considered it quite up to the improved standard for the better-conditioned villagers. That he deemed it worth while to state that it actually possessed a parlour with a fireplace and chimney, implies that this was not by any means the rule in regard to the cottages of the period; and most likely it was an improvement on the general type in the clachan of Alloway. But since Gilbert wrote more than a century has passed, and the style of living amongst those in his father's rank in life has, at least as regards the character of their dwelling-houses, improved still further. There is, in fact, hardly a clay cottage now in all lowland Scotland; and in Alloway—which has increased considerably since the poet's

days and probably partly by reason of his fame—the style of architecture is considerably above the average of the Scottish villages. As a rule Scottish villages—even apart from those in the mining districts, with their monotonous rows of shabby, dirty-white dwellings and hideous back yards—possess little of the Arcadian prettiness of the villages of rural England. The standard of comfort has greatly improved, but the situation is often bare and unsheltered, and æsthetics have usually but small consideration, except as regards the flower beds in the well-kept gardens. In Alloway, however, there is now the intrusion, especially in the neighbourhood of the cottage, of something bearing at least a faint resemblance to the suburban villa, or an attempt to combine rural simplicity with suburban gentility; and the entirely modern, and quite ‘superior’ aspect of the village generally, helps to emphasise the antique meanness of the excessively thatched and curiously small-windowed building, which is the sole vestige of the clachan of the poet’s days. For nearly a century until 1881 the cottage enjoyed the distinction of being

the village 'public'; but in that year it was purchased by the trustees of the Monument, who have caused it to assume, internally and externally, as much as possible, the appearance it presented when occupied by the poet's father; it may still, with all its needful renovations, be regarded as the veritable cottage in which the poet was born; and it is in reality a more striking and impressive memorial of him than the more elaborate one near the river. But the cottage in which Murdoch held his school is no longer extant; and indeed both the near and more remote neighbourhood of the poet's birthplace is immensely changed within the last century—all except Kirk Alloway, the Auld Brig o' Doon, the Brown Carrick Hill, and 'the banks and braes o' bonnie Doon'; and though they 'bloom as fresh and fair' every spring and summer as they were wont to do, their aspect near the Auld Brig has, of course, been greatly altered by the presence of the Monument and the Hotel, with the ornamental grounds near the river.

In its primitive rustic days, the landscape, except near the banks of the river, must

have been rather bare and bleak. The road along which Tam o' Shanter

'Skelpit on thro' dub and mire' was evidently no better a highway than the average country roads of the period, and most likely a mere unenclosed horse-track. About the period of the poet's childhood there were few, if any, carts in the agricultural districts of Ayr, luggage and agricultural produce being conveyed in sacks slung on the backs of horses; but the now admirable highways in the neighbourhood of Alloway, shaded with their lines of trees, and bordered by the neat, highly cultivated enclosures which meet the eye in all directions, have completely changed the landscape's character. The country in the neighbourhood of the cottage and the monument is now one of the most charming spots in Ayrshire. Its cultivated and wooded richness now contrasts admirably with the long, heathy, Brown Carrick Hill, which culminates in an elevation of some 900 feet, and confers on the landscape a pleasing picturesqueness, though in the time of Burns its grey-brown mass must have helped to emphasise the bleakness of what, apart

from the wooded policies of Doonholm, must have been a somewhat wild and moorish district.

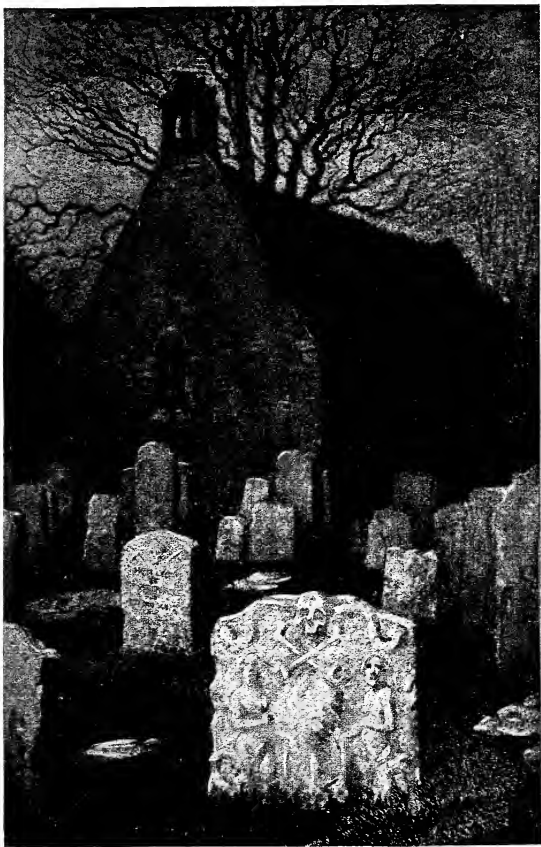
While the hill redeems the surrounding country, with its gentle elevations, from monotony, its summit commands a striking view of Arran, and the line of thriving towns that border the Ayrshire coast, of the country northward as far as Ben Lomond and other dimly visible Highland peaks, and of the moors and valleys of inland Ayrshire girdled by their widely extended rim of lesser eminences. But, though the poet's eyes must have been attracted by the hill almost as soon as he began to speculate about the outside world, and though he is not unaccustomed to make passing allusions to hills in his poetry, there is no record of his having mentioned it either in verse or prose. Whether, in an age when scenery-hunting had not begun to be a common diversion, he ever took the trouble to ascend it, there is no evidence to show; but if he did there is nothing to indicate that its magnificent prospect left any vivid and permanent impression on his mind, unless it be that to it we are indebted

ALLOWAY'S AULD HAUNTED KIRK

From a Painting by Monro S. Orr

'WHEN, glimmering thro' the groaning trees,
Kirk-Alloway seem'd in a bleeze ;
Thro' ilka bore the beams were glancing,
And loud resounded mirth and dancing—

But Maggie stood right sair astonish'd,
Till, by the heel and hand admonish'd,
She ventur'd forward on the light ;
And, wow ! Tam saw an unco sight !
Warlocks and witches in a dance :
Nae cotillon brent new frae France,
But hornpipes, jigs, strathspeys, and reels,
Put life and mettle in their heels.
A winnock-bunker in the east,
There sat auld Nick in shape o' beast ;
A towzie tyke, black, grim, and large,
To gie them music was his charge ;
He screw'd the pipes and gart them skirl,
Till roof and rafters a' did dirl.'



THE AULD AYRSHIRE

for some of the finest stanzas in 'The Vision':

‘Here rivers in the sea were lost;
There mountains to the skies were
tost:

Here tumbling billows mark'd the
coast

With surging foam;

There distant shone Art's lofty boast,
The lordly dome,' etc.

But, after all, this is hardly meant to represent an extended landscape picture; it represents rather separate scenes, as well as historic and other incidents. There is indeed little trace in his verse of any interest in wide and varied prospects. In this respect he was characteristically a peasant; his eyes were attracted mainly by the features of nature which were familiar to him in the course of his daily avocations; by the 'deep green-mantled earth' spangled with daisies and wild flowers, or the yellow, ripening corn, or the 'lang yellow broom' or the white-blossomed or red-fruited hawthorn, or the verdant woods vocal with the songs of birds, or the wind whistling through the bared trees, or the hills white with snow,

THE AULD AYRSHIRE

or the moors 'red-brown with heather-bells,' or the streams and rivers winding through the haughs, and especially

 'The bonnie, winding banks

 Where Doon runs, wimplin' clear.'

On the whole, the native district of Burns, though bleaker, barer and wilder in much of its aspect than it is now, must have been even then a pleasant, and in parts beautiful, country enough, and by no means unfitted to nourish a poet's youthful fancies.

III

AT MOUNT OLIPHANT

BY the removal of the family, in his seventh year, to Mount Oliphant, the external surroundings of Burns were but little changed; and for two years he continued, with his brother Gilbert, to attend the school of Murdoch at Alloway. Mount Oliphant is situated in the uplands some 200 feet more in altitude than Alloway, and distant from it some two miles, the distance from Ayr being about four. The farm buildings, including the dwelling-house, though now somewhat antiquated, must have been all renewed since the poet's time, when doubtless they presented the primitive thatched appearance of the period—with the usual abundance of rats 'about the riggin'.' It commands a beautiful vista towards the sea, and has also the further advantage, as the poet would count it, of proximity to the wooded banks and braes of the Doon. It was, however, still farther out of the world than

Alloway—still farther removed from the varied human interest of the town of Ayr; and, what was more important, the family's removal thither definitely decided that the lot of Burns in life was to be that of a toiling peasant. Had he been born a century later this might not have been his fate. One so intelligent, and, withal, so practical-minded and aspiring, as his father, might have arranged for his apprenticeship to some kind of trade or commercial pursuit in Ayr; but in the mid-eighteenth century there were few promising openings for country lads in towns, the great wave of commercial prosperity which was to overspread the west of Scotland having, as yet, given but few signs of its approach. Even had his father continued at Alloway, Burns would have had hardly other prospect than that of becoming a ploughman: in his own words he would 'have been marched off to be one of the little underlings about a farmhouse'; but even so, his worldly prospects might in the end have been better than they turned out to be; for though it was more particularly on his two sons' account, and that he might have them

under his charge, that the father ventured to engage in farming, the venture, in the words of Gilbert, was the source of all the father's 'difficulties and distresses'; and it was as disadvantageous to the sons as it was to the father.

From the beginning William Burns suffered from a lack of capital; and the soil of the farm was, according to Gilbert, writing in 1800, the 'very poorest' he then knew 'to be in a state of cultivation'; but to understand the character of the family's situation the general backward nature of agriculture, at this period, in Scotland, has to be considered. Writing even of a later period Dr Currie remarked that the Scottish farmer neither vested the same capital in the soil as the English farmer nor expected the same return. While he is now in the van of British agriculturalists he then lagged far behind his southern neighbour. His methods of cropping and manuring were unenlightened; and his machinery and implements were so primitive that hard, unremitting toil availed very little to mitigate his chronic poverty. The plough of the period was a huge, unwieldy, and

yet comparatively ineffective implement, drawn either by a large team of oxen or four stout horses—as indicated by Burns in ‘The Inventory’—and the progress of the one plough, which was frequently in difficulties, occupied the attention of all the men folks of the farm. In his early teens, the, in those days, much more tiring, if not more skilful, task of holding the plough was entrusted to Robert, who was a stout lad for his years, but whose young strength was severely tried and strained by the plough’s frequent shocks and collisions against stones and boulders, and by endeavours to guide it past them, and up and down the irregular knolls and hollows. The harrows and other implements for breaking down the land were equally imperfect; and their imperfection rendered the task of preparation for the seed much more tedious and prolonged than it is now—even had the Burns family not been, as they always were, somewhat shorthanded. Similarly, in harvest-time, the work of securing the ripening grain before its destruction by storms necessitated then more prolonged, unremitting toil on the part of reapers, for the

process of shearing by the hook was a slow one, unless the company of reapers was a good deal more numerous than William Burns could afford it to be ; while in winter, instead of the threshing-mill doing the work of severing the grain from the stalk, all had to come under the 'threshers' weary flingin'-tree.'

This was the round of toil which young Burns was soon called upon to enter on at Mount Oliphant—doing, on account of his father's failing strength and extreme poverty, the work of a grown man while still in his early teens. Hard though it was, he, in his early youth, in a manner enjoyed it, for in his 'Epistle to the Guid-wife of Wauchope House' he writes of it thus :

'When I was beardless, young and
 blate,
 An' first could thresh the barn,
 Or haud a yokin' at the pleugh,
 An', though forfoughten sair eneugh,
 Yet unco proud to learn ;
 When first among the yellow corn
 A man I reckoned was,
 An' wi' the lave ilk merry morn
 Could rank my rig and lass ;

Still shearing and clearing
 The tither stooked raw ;
 Wi' clavers and havers
 Wearing the day awa', etc.

This is the picture of a quite happy youth-time ; but, full of vim and sociality though he was, the continuous and premature toil to which he was subjected gradually told on his health and spirits. Had it really assisted his father to success as a farmer this would have been a mitigation ; had any prospect of real reward presented itself to the family for their hardships, they could have been faced with a certain content ; but the task which engaged continuously their whole care and energies was a merely hopeless one ; 'the farm,' as he says, 'proved a ruinous bargain' ; and when, after the death of his father's old master, the laird of Doonholm, they 'fell into the hands of a pitiless factor,' they necessarily began to deem their condition little better than that of galley slaves. 'A novel-writer,' Burns remarks, 'might perhaps have viewed these scenes with some satisfaction, but so did not I ; my indignation yet boils at the recollection of the scoundrel factor's insolent,

threatening letters, which used to set us all in tears.' They were, indeed, a model peasant family in their loyalty to one another, in their diligence, in their intelligent desire after self-improvement, in their frugal simplicity, in their Spartan endurance; but the happiness of their Ayrshire Arcadia was fatally marred by their hopeless poverty:

'Poor tenant bodies, scant o' cash,
How they maun thole a factor's snash:
He'll stamp an' threaten, curse, an'
swear,

He'll apprehend them, poind their gear;
While they maun staun', wi' aspect
humble,

An' hear it a', an' fear an' tremble!

I see how folk live that hae riches;

But surely poor folk maun be wretches!'

During the Mount Oliphant period of the poet's life there are few outstanding incidents, and comparatively little is known of his association with personalities and places in the neighbourhood. It was mainly the hobble-de-hoy time of his life; and for a considerable portion of it 'no *solitaire*,' so he affirms, 'was less acquainted with the ways of the world,' though no peasant

solitaire was so eager to know all that was to be known of the world, whether through personal observation or by perusal of the thoughts and observations of others. Books were, indeed, the chief company, and the chief recreation, of this remarkable family of peasant toilers. They kept themselves very much to themselves, partly because they had little or no opportunity of doing anything else. ‘Nothing,’ writes Gilbert, ‘could be more retired than our general manner of living at Mount Oliphant; we rarely saw anybody but the members of our own family. There were no boys of our own age, or near it, in the neighbourhood. Indeed, the greater part of the land in the vicinity was at that time possessed by shopkeepers and people of that stamp, who had retired from business, or who kept their farm in the country, at the same time that they followed business in town.’

As Mount Oliphant is in Ayr parish, and the father had a special favour for the prelections of Dalrymple, one of the Ayr ministers, the family most probably did not sever their connection with the church in Ayr, and thus had fewer opportunities

than otherwise they would have had of making acquaintance with the families in the Dalrymple parish; for the Kirk then, as indeed it is partly still, was the great social rendezvous of the country people. On set occasions the curiosity of young Burns may have led him to pay a visit to Dalrymple parish church, but the identical building he may have sat in no longer exists, the church having been entirely rebuilt since his days. The old parish school—situated at St Valley—which for a short time he attended, has also quite disappeared, though it has a successor in a flourishing Board School. Indeed, within the last century the landmarks of the district have completely changed. There is now no hamlet at Perclewan, at the smithy of which Burns got his horse shod by the great-grandfather of Principal Candlish, the father of the future Free Church. The blacksmith, like many of his craft in Scotland, was intelligent above the average of his neighbours; he had, apparently, talks with the youth about other matters than horses or farming. Most probably they discussed together the deeds of the old historic heroes of the district, for it was

from the blacksmith that he got a copy of one of the first two books he 'ever read in private,'—the 'History of Sir William Wallace,' in the modern Scots version of Hamilton of Gilbertfield, the reading of which, he says, 'poured a Scottish prejudice into my veins, which will boil along there till the floodgates of life shut in eternal rest.'

It was probably while attending Dalrymple parish school that Burns first made the acquaintance of the blacksmith's aspiring son, James Candlish, who became a lecturer of medicine in Edinburgh; but he must, of course, have often met him at the smithy, and they probably renewed acquaintance afterwards at Mauchline, for Candlish married one of the 'Mauchline belles,' the 'witty' Miss Smith. In a letter to Candlish from Edinburgh, in March 1787, Burns remarked: 'I am still, in the Apostle Paul's phrase, "the old man with his deeds," as when we were sporting about the lady-thorn.' The reference cannot be identified—some have conjectured that it may apply to a locality near the school called 'the Lady-thorn,' the scene of their sports when boys; but the phrase

‘the old man with his deeds’ suggests a possible allusion to the love frolics of their early manhood, near some trysting thorn, either at Perclewan or elsewhere.

Besides his errands to the Perclewan smithy, Burns had occasion often to visit the mill of Allan Kilpatrick, with whom the father seems to have been on specially friendly terms, for Kilpatrick’s young daughter was engaged one year as one of the harvesters at Mount Oliphant. She was the ‘handsome Nell,’ whose sweet singing, good looks, and winning ways first initiated Burns into ‘the passion of love,’ and first inspired him to ‘tune his rustic lyre.’

How far he extended his rambles into the surrounding country we have no definite information. His period of miscellaneous roving had not then begun; but in his journey to and from Kirkoswald in his seventeenth year, he had occasion to pass through a district of great traditional and historic interest. His familiarity with the fairy-haunted mounds, the Cassilis Downans, is indicated in the introductory stanza of ‘Halloween,’ which also embodies a reminiscence of the scenery

THE AULD AYRSHIRE

round Culzean Castle, on the Carrick shore to the north of Kirkoswald:

‘Upon that night, when fairies light
On Cassilis Downans dance,
Or owre the lays, in splendid blaze,
On sprightly coursers prance;
Or for Colean the route is taen,
Beneath the moon’s pale beams;
There, up the Cove, to stray and rove,
Among the rocks and streams
To sport that night.’

Whatever special memories were associated with the Halloween described by Burns, to whatever extent the incidents narrated and the characters depicted were founded on fact, the scene of the sports was evidently intended to be Mount Oliphant, or some neighbouring farm:

‘Among the bonny winding banks,
Where Doon rins, wimplin’ clear;
Where Bruce ance ruled the martial
ranks,
An’ shook his Carrick spear;
Some merry, friendly, country-folks
Together did convene
To burn their nits, an’ pou their stocks,
An’ haud their Halloween
Fu’ blithe that night.’

While acquainted with fairy traditions of Cassilis he must also have been familiar with the tragic story of the erring Countess of Cassilis, who was the heroine of the ballad of Johnny Faa; though instead of an amorous countess he makes an amorous Earl of Cassilis the subject of a lyric :

‘My Lord a-hunting he is gane,
 But hounds or hawks wi’ him are nane;
 By Colin’s cottage lies his game,
 If Colin’s Jenny be at hame.
 My Lady’s white, my lady’s red,
 And kith and kin o’ Cassilis blude;
 But her ten-pund lands o’ tocher gude
 Were a’ the charms his lordship lo’ed.’

The tragedy associated with the Castle of Auchindrane—now obliterated by a new building—in which another Earl of Cassilis, as well as his friend the Laird of Culzean was involved, Culzean as a preliminary victim, must have had its effect on his young imagination; and the historic memories associated with the district, from the days of Bruce and earlier to the times of the Covenanters, doubtless helped to colour his peculiar Scottish patriotism.

MOUNT OLIPHANT

From a Painting by Monroe S. Orr

' My father was a farmer upon the Carrick border, O,
 And carefully he bred me in decency and order, O ;
 He bade me act a manly part, though I had ne'er a farth-
 ing, O,
 For without an honest manly heart, no man was worth
 regarding, O.
 No help, nor hope, nor view had I, nor person to befriend
 me, O,
 So I must toil, and sweat and broil, and labour to sustain
 me, O,

To plough and sow, to reap and mow, my father bred me
 early, O,
 For one, he said, to labour bred, was match for fortune
 fairly, O.
 Thus all obscure, unknown, and poor, thro' life I'm
 doom'd to wander, O,
 Till down my weary bones I lay in everlasting slumber, O,
 No view, nor care, but shun whate'er might breed me pain
 or sorrow, O,
 I live to-day, as well's I may, regardless of to-morrow, O.'



Alonso Serr

With Maybole the capital of Carrick he acquired special familiarity from visiting it along with William Niven a native of the place, and nephew of the farmer of Balloch Niel, with whom Burns stayed while at Kirkoswald. His acquaintanceship was continued after his removal to Lochlea and Mossgiel; and when he was about to issue his poems he paid a visit to Maybole to obtain subscriptions, when he was introduced by Niven, whose father was a bailie of the town, to certain of the more intelligent natives, including the school-master. At a merry meeting in the King's Arms, it would appear, from a letter of Burns, that the poet was induced to favour those assembled in his honour with recitations of some of his more humorous verses. This, he was afraid, might afterwards make them see him in a light he did not deserve, that seemingly of a somewhat vain young man; and indeed modesty as to his own poetic merits was a more prominent characteristic of Burns than vanity. Vanity rather than modesty seems, however, to have been the special weakness of Niven, who got to persuade himself that 'The Epistle to a Young

Friend' was originally addressed to him, and not as Burns in the published volume professed, to the son of Robert Aiken. He was thus quite oblivious of the possibility that, since he was much the same age as the poet, to bombard him with such advice as that contained in the 'Epistle,' might imply that he was an exceptionally weak young man, 'dear amiable youth' though he may have been.

The poet's visit to Kirkoswald must have been one of the most pleasant episodes of the Mount Oliphant period. For generations the parish had included the homes of the poet's maternal ancestors, the names of many of whom are inscribed on a tombstone in the churchyard surrounding the ancient ruined church, which in olden times was of special account by reason of its relation to the Abbey of Crossraguel in the neighbourhood, partly destroyed by the Protestants of the west in 1561, but still a well-preserved ruin. The walls of the church once echoed to the thunders of Knox when denouncing a work on the Mass by Abbot Quentin Kennedy, with whom Knox had also a disputation at Maybole in September

1562, which lasted three days. The school where Burns prosecuted his studies in mensuration was a small apartment in a cottage opposite the churchyard, whither it had been lately removed from a ruinous building in the east end of the old church. He resided at some distance from the village, with his maternal uncle, Samuel Brown, who lodged at the farm of Balloch Niel; but being removed from the rigid and exacting control of his father, he felt himself, for the first time of his life, pretty much his own master and guardian; and, according to his own account, though he made pretty good progress in his studies, he made still greater progress in his 'knowledge of mankind.' The scenes 'of swaggering riot and roaring dissipation,' which were the inevitable interludes of the contraband trade, were observed by him with that critical and keenly humorous interest in the more squalidly, eccentric freaks of human nature, which is responsible for some of his most realistic and striking verse; and while he thus learned, as he tells us, to 'move without fear in a drunken squabble,' he also made progress towards

the acquirement of the ease and freedom of address, which latterly enabled him to place himself on a footing of social cordiality with even the more regardless members of the community.

So much for the sordid side of his Kirkoswald surroundings. How much his more sentimental experiences there really meant for him, it is hard to say; but two kailyards of the village—that of the schoolhouse and that of the neighbouring cottage—were the scene of the inauguration of a love idyll, which was perhaps the first one of his real manhood, and therefore for the time being of a peculiarly absorbing character. According to his own version of the affair, while busily engaged in taking the sun's altitude, his attention was suddenly distracted by the vision of what he, in his somewhat unpleasantly affected French fashion, terms a 'charming *filette*,' the daughter of a neighbouring cottager, whom he poetically represents as like

'Proserpine, gathering flowers,
Herself a fairer flower.'

But his eyes most likely were occupied more with the 'fairer flower' than the

vegetables which he supposes her to have been plucking. Whether he asked her for a posy he neglects to mention; but we must suppose he accosted her in a sufficiently fascinating manner; for they were immediately on terms of evening walks and mutual vows, while for the poet himself it was a case even of 'sleepless nights,' during the short week that remained of his stay at Kirkoswald. 'We'll gently walk,' so he represents himself as addressing her in a 'Song, composed in August'—evidently however not written then and there but in mere commemoration of the episode:

'We'll gently walk, and sweetly talk,
While the silent moon shines clearly;
I'll clasp thy waist and, fondly prest,
Swear how I lo'e thee dearly.'

Burns was yet to clasp many waists besides that of Peggy Thomson, and swear of his love in equally ardent terms to their owners; but if love between him and Peggy soon died out, sincere affection and respect seemed, in the case of both, to have survived; and when, after she was the wife of another, he took farewell of her with the intention of proceed-

ing to the Indies, he reports that both he and she were so moved that neither could speak. But the main influence of the episode was that on his general habits. Being now initiated into the fascination of gently walking and sweetly talking in moonlight nights, he, not long afterwards—if not, as he represents, immediately on returning home—resolved, ‘in order,’ as he puts it, ‘to give’ his ‘manners a brush,’ to attend a country dancing school; and having thus begun his career as a rural Lothario, he was continually finding new incentives and subjects for the cultivation of his lyric muse.

In other respects his Kirkoswald visit was fruitful of influences, which left certain permanent impressions. The ancient associations of the district with the heroic Bruce, who was Earl of Carrick and Lord of Turnberry Castle, helped to fan the flame of patriotic enthusiasm which glows in so much of his verse; and there are further definite traces of the memory of his visit in two of the greatest of his poems, ‘Halloween’—as we have already seen—and ‘Tam o’ Shanter.’ Here he is supposed to have made acquaintance with

the prototypes — Douglas Graham and John Davidson, whose graves are in the Kirkoswald churchyard—of the immortal ‘drouthie cronies,’ ‘Tam o’ Shanter’ and ‘Souter Johnnie’; and it is even asserted that he once heard from the lips of Graham’s wife, Helen M’Taggart, the substantial denunciations of her absent husband which are set forth with such glowing rhetorical art in the poem; while the village inn beside the church is identified as the ‘Lord’s House,’ where Kate [Helen’s prototype]—untruthfully, according to the traditionary reputation of the inn and its very circumspect hostess—in her denunciations represents her husband as drinking on Sunday,

‘With Kirkton Jean till Monday.’

But for the increased signs of prosperity and comfort amongst the inhabitants of this remote agricultural seaboard parish, and the absence of the smuggling excitements with the accompanying scenes of ‘swaggering riot and roaring dissipation,’ the district until lately must have differed but little in character from what it was when Burns and Peggy Thomson strayed there in moonlight evenings to view

THE AULD AYRSHIRE

‘the charms of nature,
The rustling corn, the fruited thorn,
And ilka happy creature.’

Now, however, the railway whistle has begun to arouse the echoes of the Carrick shore; the ‘fore’ of the golfer has, for some time, been heard in the land; and at Turnberry, hallowed by its memories of Bruce, the inevitable hotel, ‘commanding’—in the words of a newspaper enthusiast—‘a panoramic view of the great highway of the seas,’ etc., in spick and span splendour now fronts the western Carrick horizon; and the villa of the speculative builder will doubtless soon be an appreciable feature of the landscape, and more and more combine its neat, artificial prettiness with the more rustic and ancient charms of the ‘rustling corn’ and ‘the fruited thorn.’

IV

LOCHLEA AND TARBOLTON, ETC.

IN 1777 William Burns reached a break in his lease at Mount Oliphant; and on Whitsunday of that year removed to Lochlea in the parish of Tarbolton. From Tarbolton, Lochlea is some two and a half miles distant by the higher of the two roads to Mauchline. On leaving the village, we pass round an eminence—the hill of Baal's fire, according to the traditional origin of the word Tarbolton—and then descend toward's 'Willie's Mill' as described in 'Death and Doctor Hornbook':

‘I was come round about the hill,
An' todlin' down on Willie's mill,
Setting my staff wi' a' my skill,
To keep me sicker.’

The Cumnock hills over which the 'moon began to gloure' faced Burns dimly in the far distance. The mill, now a rather dilapidated range of whitewashed buildings, lies in the valley, and is passed on the right just before we cross the small but

classic Fail, associated in an early rhyme with the 'berry-brown ale' of an ancient friary destroyed, as recorded by Knox, by the Protestants of the west in 1561. The place which the dreadful *Something* selected for the interview was not a particularly uncanny-looking spot, but it was the most uncanny part of the way between Tarbolton and Lochlea. The wayfarer was in, or nearing, the gloom of the valley, which he would soon leave for the bare, exposed hillside, and probably the road was slightly shaded, as it now is near the bridge, by trees, though even the oldest of them now standing could hardly have been there when Burns passed that way. As was to be expected, the stone on which they took a seat is 'still pointed out,' though for Burns himself to have pointed it out would really have been carrying the joke too far. It is just as likely as not that after one of his trying descents he took a seat on the coping of the bridge, whether he there foregathered or not with any earthly or unearthly companion. The 'auld kirk-hammer' that then

'strak the bell

Some wee short hour ayont the twel'

has long ceased to announce the hours of the day and night, the church having been rebuilt in 1821, when a new clock was inserted in the tower of the new spire. The kirk stands high at the north-eastern end of the village, and the striking of the clock in the silence of the night would be heard with quite startling clearness by the two gossips in the valley below.

From Willie's mill the Mauchline road winds gradually up the hillsides, which are now covered by well-cultivated fields separated by trim hedgerows, and dotted here and there by whitewashed farm buildings, with their clumps of trees renewed probably from time immemorial. Even in its summer greenness the country has a somewhat bare and bleak aspect, and this characteristic is emphasised rather than not by the few strips of rugged plantation here and there visible on the hillsides, and the distant woods in the river haughs. In its winter bareness it must be a 'bleaky' country indeed. The main compensation is the extensive view in all directions, which though hardly beautiful or picturesque, except towards the sea, with Arran and other islands in

the far distance, conveys an exhilarating sense of freedom and expansion, and doubtless had its own effect in encouraging the poet's day-dreams of human liberty and brotherhood.

Lochlea is not visible from the Mauchline road until you attain the hill beyond the country road on the left, that leads up to the farm, which is the second on the left. It is situated in a slight hollow, but with a pretty open exposure to the winds that 'aff Ben Lomond blaw,' though not so much so as Mossgiel. The farmhouse and steading have, of course, been renewed since the time of Burns, and the immediate surroundings have doubtless been a good deal changed. The loch from which the farm takes its name, and which was originally formed to feed one of the old grinding-mills, has now been drained; but some strips of plantation to the north-east may occupy the position of those, though the trees must have been renewed, by the sheltered side of which Burns delighted to walk. 'There is scarcely any earthly object,' he wrote, 'gives me more—I do not know if I should call it pleasure, but something which exults me, some-

thing which enraptures me—than to walk in the sheltered side of a wood or high plantation, in a cloudy winter day, and hear a stormy wind howling among the trees and raving o'er the plain. It is my best season for devotion; my mind is rapt in a kind of enthusiasm to Him who, in the pompous language of Scripture, “walks upon the wings of the wind.” In one of these seasons, just before a trade misfortune, I composed the following song:—

“The wintry west extends its blast,
 And hail and rain does blow,
 Or the stormy north sends driving forth
 The blinding sleet and snaw:
 While tumbling brown, the burn comes
 down,
 And roars frae bank and brae;
 And bird and beast in covert rest,
 And pass the heartless day.”

At Lochlea, which was some ten miles from Mount Oliphant, the family were more remote from the world as represented to them by the county town of Ayr, their nearest town being now Kilmarnock, some seven miles distant. They were dependent for social intercourse on an almost entirely new circle of acquaintances, who

were nearly all primitively rustic, but much more accessible to intercourse than those adjoining Mount Oliphant. In addition to this, the social instincts of Robert and the elder children were more eager for gratification. It is matter of dispute whether the dancing school Robert first attended was near Mount Oliphant or near Lochlea; but if he did attend one when at Mount Oliphant, his manners would already have got that 'brush' which he deemed needful in one aspiring to be a rustic gallant. The father, the superior of most of his neighbours in ability and intelligence, was naturally reserved except in very congenial society. Probably he never lost the hard and brusque style of address, peculiar to his native region; and his wearing struggle with misfortunes had now begun severely to affect his health and spirits; but the mother, the daughter of a Carrick farmer, would feel herself quite at home amongst her rural Ayrshire neighbours; and the son with his Kirkoswald experience had already, when they removed to Lochlea, made considerable progress in the social facility, which made him a welcome guest

wherever 'two or three were met together.'

The grave Gilbert, modelled very much after his father, remarks that the Lochlea period of the poet's life was not marked by much literary improvement. This is hardly true, for it was while at Lochlea that his poetic genius first gave indications of the great qualities which were to captivate the world. But evidently his leisure hours were not so wholly devoted to the study of books as of old; and Gilbert is doubtless substantially correct when he goes on to say: 'But during this time the foundation was laid of certain habits in my brother's character, which afterwards became but too prominent, and which malice and envy have taken delight to enlarge on. Though, when young, he was bashful and awkward in his intercourse with women, yet when he approached manhood, his attachment to their society became very strong, and he was constantly the victim of some fair enslaver. The symptoms of his passion were often such as nearly to equal those of the celebrated Sappho. . . . He had always a particular jealousy of people

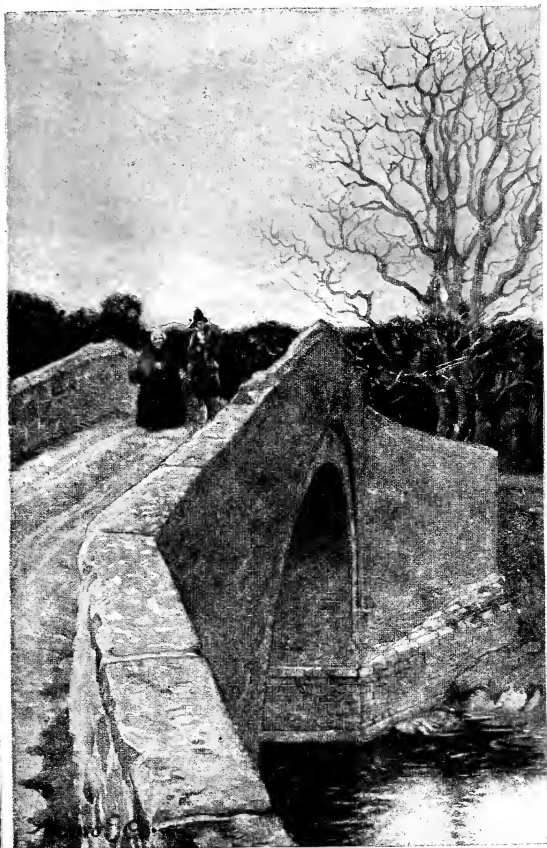
THE AULD BRIG O' DOON

From a Painting by Monroe S. Orr

'SWEET are the banks, the banks o' Doon,
The spreading flowers are fair,
And everything is blythe and glad,
But I am fu' o' care.
Thou'll break my heart, thou bonie bird,
That sings upon the bough!
Thou minds me o' the happy days
When my fause Luvie was true.

Thou'll break my heart, thou bonie bird,
That sings beside thy mate,
For sae I sat, and sae I sang,
And wist na o' my fate!

Aft hae I rov'd by bonie Doon,
To see the woodbine twine,
And ilka bird sang o' its luvie,
And sae did I o' mine.
Wi' lightsome heart I pu'd a rose
Upon its thorny tree,
But my fause lover staw my rose
And left the thorn wi' me.'





who were richer than himself, or who had more consequence in life. His love, therefore, rarely settled on persons of this description. When he selected anyone out of the sovereignty of his good pleasure to whom he should pay his particular attention, she was instantly invested with a sufficient stock of charms out of the plentiful stores of his own imagination; and there was often a great disparity between his fair captivator and her attributes. One generally reigned paramount in his affections; but . . . Robert was frequently encountering other attractions, which found so many under-plots in the drama of his love.' Gilbert's account of the general qualities of his brother's fair captivators tends to do away with any special interest that might attach to the names of those that are known to have attracted his passing fancy. They had apparently no particular claims to admiration beyond those of the average comely young woman; and Gilbert mentions none of them as 'excelling' in personal charms. For the critical observations of Robert on some, and his lyric raptures about others, the reader may refer to such verses as 'The Tarbolton

Lasses,' 'The Ronals of the Bennals,' 'The Rigs of Barley,' 'Montgomery's Peggy,' 'Tibbie, I hae seen the day,' 'And I'll kiss thee yet,' 'Corn Rigs and Barley Rigs,' and 'My Nannie, O'. Apparently he soon got on terms of easy familiarity, and something more, with most of the rustic beauties of his neighbourhood; and the circle of his roving acquaintance with the fair sex gradually assumed a pretty wide circumference. As he himself puts it:

'When first I came to Stewart Kyle

My mind it wasna steady;

Where e'er I gaed, where e'er I rade,

A mistress still I had ay.'

His chief associates at this period, both men and women, were simple, unsophisticated rustics, whose methods of social intercourse and enjoyment were formed on very primitive models. Love-making and flirtation were pursued by him mainly after the clandestine fashion celebrated in many traditional ballads having reference to the secret opening of doors and windows; and when he was not principal in an affair of this kind he was quite ready to act as assistant. 'A country lad, he tells us, 'seldom carries on an amour

without an assistant confidant. I possessed a curiosity, zeal, and intrepid dexterity in these matters, which recommended me as a proper second in duels of that kind; and I daresay I felt as much pleasure at being in the secrets of half the amours of the parish, as ever did Premier at knowing the intrigues of half of the courts of Europe.' 'To the sons and daughters of toil these amours,' he adds, 'are matters of the most serious nature; to them the ardent hope, the stolen interview, the tender farewell are the greatest and most delicious parts of their enjoyment.'

For miscellaneous social intercourse there were the foregatherings at the kirk before the services, and at the inns, or elsewhere, between them; and, as now, the gudemen had the week-day diversions of rous, fairs, markets, and other agricultural functions. For social amusements the young folks had their dancing schools, taught by itinerant professors of the terpsichorean art, either in a village school-room or farm barn. Dancing, from time immemorial, was a favourite pastime of the Scottish peasants, and formed an important part of the programme at such

THE AULD AYRSHIRE

merry meetings as Christenings, Harvest Homes, and Penny Weddings, or at the diversions associated with Fasten E'en, Halloween, and other traditional feast-days. Of the rustic young folks, as they appeared at these gatherings, we have a charming description in 'Halloween':

'The lasses feat, an' cleanly neat,
Mair braw than when they're fine;
Their faces blythe, fu' sweetly kythe
Hearts leal, an' warm, an' kin':
The lads sae trig, wi' wooer-babs
Weel-knotted on their garten,
Some unco blate, an' some wi' gabs,
Gar lasses' hearts gang startin'
Whyles fast at night.'

While the diversions of Halloween—a night on which the fairies were supposed to hold a general anniversary—had relation mainly to 'charms and spells' 'big with prophecy' to those who ventured to put their fortune to their test, the most common amusements of the social gatherings were music, dancing, and certain rude, rustic dramas, reminiscences, perhaps, of more elaborate performances of the olden time. A very common social function was what was termed a 'Rocking,' as chron-

icled by Burns in one of his 'Epistles to Lapraik':

'On Fasten-e'en we had a rockin',
To ea' the crack an' weave our stockin';
And there was muckle fun and jokin',
Ye needna doubt;
At length we had a hearty yokin'
At "sang about."'

At a Rocking industry was combined with amusement. The origin of the custom was the gathering of young women to assist one of the neighbours in spinning wool. But whither young women assembled, swains were sure to be attracted; and most commonly each young woman had an attendant follower, who deemed it a special favour to be allowed to carry her spinning implements going and returning. Thus Burns in 'Duncan Davison':

'There was a lass, they ca'd her Meg,
And she held o'er the moors to spin;
There was a lad that followed her,
They ca'd him Duncan Davison.
Themoor was dreigh, and Meg wasskeigh;
Her favour Duncan couldna win,
For with the rock she wad him knock,
And aye she shook the temper pin,' etc.
The labours of the industrious young

women were lightened by song and story ;
and the Burns' account of the termination
of a Halloween evening would doubtless
apply to a 'Rocking' :

'Wi' merry sangs, an' friendly cracks,
I wat they didna weary ;
And unco tales, and funny jokes,
Their sports were cheap an' cheery :
Till buttered sow'ns, wi' fragrant lunt,
Set a' their gabs a-steerin' ;
Syne, wi' a social glass o' strunt,
They started aff careerin'
Fu' blythe that night.'

Of the acquaintanceship of Burns with
the farmers and farmers' sons we have
but scant information of a definite kind,
though from his being in the secret of
most of the love affairs of the district we
must infer that he was on pretty friendly
terms with a considerable number of
young men as well as young women. We
have his own testimony that his conversa-
tional powers—which he connects with 'a
certain wild logical talent and a strength
of thought something resembling the rudi-
ments of good sense'—made him a wel-
come guest in the rude, bucolic companies
at farm ingles and village publics. In this

he is corroborated by his friend, David Sillar, who, however, adds that while his 'satirical seasoning' often 'set the table in a roar,' the mirth in the case of some was not unaccompanied by 'suspicious fear.' The fact was that Burns could hardly refrain, with all his love of good fellowship, from secretly despising his company; and it was only with a select associate that he could converse in other than very superficial terms, even if he found a few who so far appealed to certain qualities of his mind and character.

Among his more kindred spirits was the clever, if too broadly humorous, farmer, 'rough, rude, ready-witted Rankine' of Adamhill, who, however, was so much older than Burns as to have a daughter Anne who claimed to be the heroine of 'Corn Rigs.' On William Muir of Tarbolton Mill, still more his senior, Burns wrote an epitaph the heading of which in his First Common-Place Book, describes him as 'my own friend and my father's friend,' while in the epitaph he refers to him thus :

'The friend of man, the friend of truth,
The friend of age, and guide of youth,

Few hearts, like his, with virtue warm'd,
 Few heads with knowledge so informed.
 The sincerity of Muir's and his wife's
 friendship to Burns was manifested when
 they gave shelter to Jean Armour for a
 time, on her expulsion from her father's
 house; and it is as likely as not that the
 advice of 'the guide of youth' had some-
 thing to do with the resolution of Burns
 to marry her. In any case it is evident
 that the Burns and Muir households got
 to be on terms of very especial intimacy.
 Among the more intelligent of the far-
 mers' sons the gifts and acquirements
 of their new acquaintance must have
 awakened considerable admiration; and
 it was probably mainly at his instigation
 and for the sake of his company that a
 few of them in 1780 resolved to form the
 Bachelor's Club, which met in a public-
 house at Tarbolton, Burns himself being
 chosen the first president. It was a kind
 of debating club, but devoted also to
 'mirth and diversion,' within the 'bounds
 of innocence and decorum.' One of the
 rules was: 'Every man proper for a mem-
 ber of this society must have a frank,
 open, honest heart; above everything

dirty or mean; and must be a professed lover of one or more of the female sex,' etc. In an account of the Club, engrossed in its Book, we are further informed that they held a ball 'in honour of our society,' on a race night in July 1782, each member bringing with him a partner, when they 'spent the evening in such innocence and merriment, such cheerfulness and good humour, that every brother will long remember it with pleasure and delight.' In the rules and proceedings of the Club there is an engaging Arcadian simplicity that disarms criticism. But apart from the enlivening wit of Burns himself the debates were most probably rather dreary, and the oratory of a very homespun character. Most likely Burns lost his interest in the meetings as his powers began to ripen and his circle of acquaintances became more varied. The club ultimately numbered about a dozen, but the only member besides Robert and Gilbert Burns to whom any interest attaches is David Sillar, son of the farmer of Spittle-side. Sillar had some talent; but his association with Burns led him to cherish poetic ambitions, which were not conson-

ant with the character of his abilities, although he died a more prosperous man than his brother poet and fiddler. Notwithstanding the flattering injunction of Robert to Davie to 'haud to the muse,' Robert had probably a pretty shrewd estimate of Davie's poetic effusions, which display not the faintest touch of genius, and only very moderate rhyming skill. Sillar's main claim to remembrance is that he evoked from the greater poet such excellently rhymed 'wise saws and modern instances' as those to be found in 'The First Epistle to Davie.'

At the time of the formation of the Club Burns suggested that its membership should be confined to country lads, the village young men being, in his opinion, too glibly confident; but gradually he was as much 'Hail fellow well met' with the young men of the village as with their rural brethren. Tarbolton was then a thriving enough village, dependent mainly on weaving, but having also a considerable country connection as regards shopping, etc., while its annual June fair was one of the most noted saturnalias in Ayrshire. Now, however,

signs of dilapidation and decay are but too manifest. The weaving trade is well-nigh extinct; and the village being about a mile and a half from its so-called railway station, modern facilities of communication have done nothing to better its fortunes. Though not far removed from seats of busy industry, the tide of modern prosperity has failed to reach it; and it now presents very much the hopeless look of one of the smaller towns in the west of Ireland. The only difference is the evidence of a certain struggle against its evil fortunes. It is, as Burns wrote of the Auld Brig of Ayr, 'teughly doure,' but time is nevertheless telling sadly upon it. Though several comparatively modern houses testify to the presence of some kind of faith in a better future for it, the efforts to renovate and supersede the old thatched houses are becoming fewer, year by year; and the best days of the ancient village are evidently now past. Its long and miserable-looking main street would in the time of Burns be lined mainly by low, thatched cottages, interspersed by only a few two-storey buildings; but while there would

be much that to modern eyes would be suggestive both of indigence and squalor, there would be no symptoms of hopeless decay; no roofless walls and boarded-up windows would break the old, mean monotony of the street architecture.

But the fact that the full tide of modern prosperity has not reached the village has assisted in preserving the memorials of its connection with Burns. If there are few houses which present a quite similar aspect to that which they did in his days, the veritable old walls of some of them still remain. The identical upper room in which the Bachelor's Club assembled is still in existence, though the house is no longer a public. A clubman of such sobriety that he did not spend more than three-pence a night in drink would hardly now be welcome in a public-house; but in those days many publics were merely ale-houses frequented by very frugal customers.

At the same time, the Bachelor's Club was evidently intended to be an exceptionally exemplary and sober institution. For some centuries drinking had been the main diversion of even the more reputable Scot; and towards the close of the eighteenth

century the bibulous habits of the people were reaching their acme. Amongst those who could afford it, and even among those who couldn't, drinking, on social occasions, to excess, was more the rule than the exception. That it happened to be so at this time amongst the Freemasons is not therefore to be imputed for sin to Freemasonry; it merely meant that Freemasonry is essentially a social institution, and that the ever-flowing bowl was then deemed the special symbol of sociality:

‘May ev’ry true brother of the compass
and square

Have a big-belly’d bottle, when harass’d
with care!’

Such were the honest and heartfelt sentiments of the Tarbolton masons. Harassed with care as Burns had been from childhood, and possessed as he was of an irresistible sociability, the convivial meetings of the craft were bound to prove attractive to him, even apart from his poetic dreams as to liberty, equality, and fraternity. A small, shabby cottage in Tarbolton is still in existence, which was the inn where the St David’s Lodge of the village made him ‘a brother of the mystic tie’ on 4th July

1781. Shortly before this, as it was to prove, world-famous event in the history of the lodge, a junction had taken place between it and the St James' Lodge, the name St David's being retained; but a separation between them took place in June 1782, when Burns adhered to the St James' Lodge, of which, in July 1784, he was elected depute-master. The brethren of the latter lodge continued to be the 'companions of his social joy,' even after he removed to Mossgiel, and it was to them he addressed the masonic 'Farewell,' when he 'intended going to Jamaica.'

Whether his association with the Freemasons was largely responsible for furthering in Burns such drinking habits as he contracted need not engage our consideration, for the simple reason that since, as we have seen, drinking habits were then in Scotland more the rule than the exception, Burns could not have been the very sociable person that he was without, more or less, contracting drinking habits. Doubtless the masonic connection also helped to acquaintanceship with a few influential patrons who were of advantage to him in obtaining subscriptions

for his book of poems; but after all Burns was not dependent for poetic success either on Masons or patrons. The fates had designed him to be the rare poetic genius that he was, and his fellow-men could neither mend nor mar him as a poet, though his very peculiar social circumstances had, without doubt, a good deal to do with so far marring him as a man. The most important, if an indirect, consequence of the association of Burns with Tarbolton Freemasonry was that it accidentally inspired him to write 'Death and Dr Hornbook.' It was probably when—'canty' with the 'clachan yill' drunk in the lodge—he was on his way home from one of the Mason meetings that the rough outline of the poem was conceived; and it is stated as a fact that the person whom it satirises—John Wilson, the parish schoolmaster, who also kept a small shop, at which he sold drugs—had at a meeting of the lodge 'aired his medical skill' in a manner that had given the poet offence. According to all accounts Wilson, if, like many of his tribe, a little pedantic and small-minded, was a worthy person enough; and hardly deserving of a punish-

THE OLD MASONIC LODGE AT TARBOLTON

From a Painting by Monro S. Orr

' ADIEU ! a heart-warm, fond adieu ;

Dear brothers of the *Mystic Tie* !

Ye favour'd, ye enlighten'd few,

Companions of my social joy ;

Tho' I to foreign lands must hie,

Pursuing Fortune's slidd'ry ba',

With melting heart, and brimful eye,

I'll mind you still, tho' far awa'.

Oft have I met your social band,

And spent the cheerful, festive night ;

Oft, honour'd with supreme command,

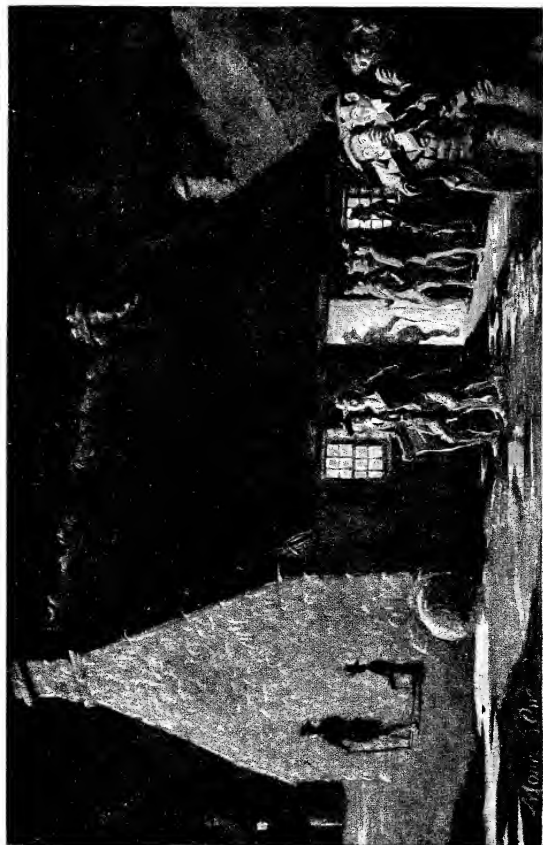
Presided o'er the *Sons of Light* :

And by the *Hieroglyphic* bright,

Which none but *Craftsmen* ever saw !

Strong Mem'ry on my heart shall write

Those happy scenes when far awa'.





THE AULD AYRSHIRE

ment so tingling as he must have felt this to be. Nevertheless he may have less hurt the *amour propre* of the poet than tickled his sense of humour; and probably mere joy in the triumphant exercise of his art may have made Burns somewhat oblivious to the cruelty of what after all was more a humorous than a bitter castigation.

Even before he obtained fame throughout Ayrshire, and latterly throughout Scotland, by his published book of verses, Burns must have acquired some kind of notoriety in the district; and we may well believe that his sayings and doings supplied a good deal of matter for wonder and speculation to the gossips of the village and the farmhouses. His impressive personality and his remarkable gifts of talk and repartee were alone sufficient to give him exceptional notoriety even if he had never written a stanza. Conscious of his growing personal ascendancy in all companies he now began to blossom into something of a rustic dandy. 'Half-fed, half-sarkit' he might be, but on Sundays he managed to make more than a fair show as regards his outward man. To wear the 'only tied hair in the parish'

would cost him but little, and as most of the farmers and farmers' sons wore a plaid at the kirk, it need not surprise us to learn that he also wore one; but we are told that he chose one of an exceptional colour, and that he 'wrapped it in a particular manner round his shoulders,' which colour and arrangement would, of course, cost him nothing either: here, as elsewhere in his earlier years, he indicates a happy facility in making the best of his adverse circumstances. The brilliant-eyed, handsome young farmer with the tied hair, and the yellow-brown plaid wrapped so sprucely round his shoulders, must have perfectly succeeded in making himself a conspicuous object for the glances of the rustic belles in Tarbolton Church. Further, Burns tells us that with ladies he had 'a frank address and *politesse*'; and here, as in most allusions to himself, he indulges in no vain boasts. Sillar states that he was greatly struck with his facility 'in addressing the fair sex,' whom he happened to meet on the fields between the services. 'Many times,' says Sillar, 'when I have been bashfully anxious how to express

myself, he would have entered into conversation with them with the greatest ease and freedom, and it was generally a death-blow to our conversation, however agreeable, to meet a female acquaintance.'

It was most likely during these walks on Sunday that he first made the acquaintance not only of Montgomery's Peggy but of her most famed successor in his affections, Highland Mary, who is reputed to have been for some time a dairymaid at Coilsfield or Montgomery Castle, embosomed amongst the woods in the valley of the Fail about a mile south of Tarbolton. It was amongst these same woods that, according to his own poetic account, he wandered with Highland Mary on the day of their last farewell :

'Ye banks and braes and streams around
 The castle o' Montgomery,
 Green be your woods, and fair your
 flowers,
 Your waters never drumlie !
 There Summer first unfauld her robes
 And there the langest tarry ;
 For there I took the last fareweel
 O' my sweet Highland Mary !'

THE AULD AYRSHIRE

The spot where the farewell interview took place is of course 'still pointed out,' and a Bible, supposed to have been given her as a parting gift and pledge, is preserved at Alloway; but many things which enthusiasts have accepted as gospel regarding Burns and Mary Campbell could have been made known only by the ghosts of the one or the other. Burns refers to the 'hallowed grove,'

'Where by the winding Ayr we met
To live one day of parting love.'

But by 'the hallowed grove' he probably did not mean any particular clump of trees or shrubs, but merely the Montgomery woods in general; and he may have indulged in poetical license as to the name of the river. It is, however, as likely as not that the parting took place near the junction of the Fail with the Ayr, for it was, naturally, thereabout that he would leave the woods either for Lochlea or Mossgiel or Mauchline. Anyone, therefore, who takes the low, the Ayr, road to Mauchline—which crosses the road from Tarbolton station to the village about half a mile from the station—may as he crosses the bridge over the

Fail congratulate himself on having been reasonably near the region of the parting spot; or if he prefers to gratify his curiosity with more definite, but of course purely imaginary, information, he may inquire for it at the village of Failford.

While one of the most conspicuous of the rustic beaus in the Tarbolton parish church, and often spending much of the interval between the services in walks and talks with one or more young women, Burns was also accustomed to join the groups of male conversationalists in the churchyard. Amongst these groups and the bands of rural worshippers winding their way up the hillsides to their several farms, he often held debate on high matters of doctrine. The douce elderly farmers he frequently puzzled and sometimes scandalised by his fearless and novel criticism of their ancient, time-honoured opinions; and with many he necessarily won the reputation of being a dangerously heretical young man, whom it was easier to condemn than to answer.

Being both of an independent and poetical cast of mind Burns in his theological and other opinions was not always consistent.

They differed a good deal according to his mood. His interest in theology was indeed but secondary; it arose mainly from his distaste for Calvinism and Puritanism. He was disposed, if anything, to hold aloof from ecclesiasticism; but his sympathies were, of course, more with the liberal lack of doctrine amongst the Moderates than with the excessive doctrinal rigidity of the Evangelicals; and extremely democratic though he was in his social sentiments, he was in no way partial to popular election in the Kirk, or as he put it, to the election of the herds by 'the brutes themselves.' The reason was that the mass of the people loved the nervous excitement or emotional intoxication produced by the 'tidings of damnation' harangues, which harangues Burns could not at all away with. The minister of Tarbolton was happily for him not an Evangelical:

'Auld Wodrow lang has wrought mischief';

so Burns represents the orthodox as lamenting, which also means that Burns himself quite approved of 'Auld Wodrow,' though we have no further information

as to his relations with him. With his assistant and successor, 'gude Macmath,' ordained 6th May 1782, he was evidently on very friendly terms, as witness his 'Epistle to Macmath,' along with which, be it noted, he enclosed a copy of 'Holy Willie's Prayer.'

Latterly, while he was still at Lochlea, the pretensions of Burns as a rhymer must have become known. It would be passing strange if he never showed or recited to any of the young women the songs he had made in their honour; and we may well believe also that occasional verses of his which have never appeared in print, found some kind of surreptitious circulation in the district. Saunders Tait expedlar and ex-soldier, and latterly tailor and, though occasionally, shebeener, even bailie in Tarbolton, gives in his 'Poems and Songs,' published in 1796, as one of his reasons for attacking Burns that he had 'made a sang' on him. The 'sang' or verses of Burns on this eccentric village laureate must have been one of his most amusing, if one of his less reputable, productions, and may well have contained pictures of the more squalid phases of life

in that village as realistic as the Mauchline saturnalia of 'The Jolly Beggars.' Indeed, since 'The Jolly Beggars' survived almost by mere accident, and Burns latterly had only a very vague remembrance of having written it, it is as likely as not that several other pieces of his in the same vein have perished. Tait's verses are not only very 'rude and raploch' in form, but grossly and densely squalid in tone. Not the faintest scintillation of genius relieves his homely vulgarity; and if keen and caustic in intent, his wit is entirely of the abusive Billingsgate order. Little or no importance attaches to his blackguarding of Burns; though his verses are not un-instructive as to the character of the talk and gossip then prevailing among certain coteries of the Tarbolton villagers. For the diatribes of the rather disreputable eccentric on Burns and the Burns family allowance must, however, be made, on account of his natural desire to have poetic revenge on the son, whose great poetic fame had probably also aroused his jealousy.

The monotony of the poet's ploughman life at Lochlea was broken by his unsuc-

cessful attempt, begun in 1781, to enter the flax-dressing trade in Irvine. The attempt was prompted by a desire to be in a position to marry Elison Begbie, the 'lass of Cumnock banks'; but since she refused him on the eve of his setting out to Irvine, his special motive for perseverance in his venture was gone; and this doubtless assisted with various adverse circumstances in inducing him to relinquish the attempt early in the following year. The main result of his Irvine episode was to widen his acquaintance with the less reputable members of society. His intimate friendship with the widely experienced captain of a merchant vessel also assisted to give his 'mind a turn'; and, as he confesses, the acquaintanceship did him mischief as well as benefit. It helped to initiate him into what may be termed the practically cynical side of love-making, though he did not put the ideas of his friend Brown into practice at Irvine. Indeed during the chief part of his stay there he was, on account of his love disappointment, in a very desponding condition, and quite disinclined for new love adventures. The town is thus associated

with none of the romantic episodes of his career, and the mementoes of his connection with it are of a very commonplace kind. What was the 'heckling shop' of his partner Peacock still occupies its place in a tawdry and squalid lane off the High Street; and in the same lowly neighbourhood are still to be seen the lodgings in which he wrote the melancholy, despondent letters to his father, and the pious, hypochondriacal verses which he finally published in his first Edinburgh edition. The surroundings are forbidding and depressing; and the Irvine scenes are hardly worth a special errand to them, except by those enthusiasts whose curiosity is 'without bounds or limits.'

The later months of the family's residence at Lochlea were rendered anxious and disagreeable by a lawsuit with their landlord; and they were also saddened by the now hopeless condition of the father's health, though his death, 13th February 1784, was to him almost a merciful relief from his misfortunes. Had he survived he would have had to endure both the bitter mortification of what he would have deemed a wrongful defeat of his lawsuit,

and the almost intolerable humiliation of bankruptcy. As for the family they so far mitigated their misfortunes by ranking as creditors on their father's estate for wages due them ; and on the rather slender sum, earned in what Saunders Tait and probably others deemed a scandalously unscrupulous fashion, were able to become tenants of the farm of Mossgiel. The poet thus entered on a new phase of his experience. Whatever the amount and character of the influence latterly exercised over him by his father he was now entirely freed from its restraint. The family it is true were still together as of old, and they owned the new farm in partnership, but Robert was now the recognised head of the house, and entirely at liberty to conduct himself as seemed good in his own eyes.

V

MOSSGIEL, MAUCLINE, AND KILMARNOCK

MOSSGIEL being only about a mile and a half to the south-east of Mauchline, the poet by his removal found his circle of acquaintanceship widened rather than quite changed. Although Mauchline — from which the new farm was hardly a mile distant, and in which parish it was situated—now became the chief centre of his sociality, he not unfrequently had occasion to visit Tarbolton, with the St James' Lodge, of which his connection was still preserved; and with the more distant of his old neighbours he would often forgather at fairs and markets. The farm of Mossgiel occupies mainly a high ridge of ground of a considerably greater elevation than the Lochlea lands, and commanding extensive views in all directions. Its immediate neighbourhood is bleak and bare, but it is nearer than Lochlea to the woods of the southern tableland. The farmhouse and steading

THE AULD AYRSHIRE

stand a park's breadth from the Mauchline and Tarbolton road, while the road to Kilmarnock skirts the farmlands on the east. The straggling rows of trees skirting the Tarbolton road and two sides of the park suggest something of faded grandeur; and probably owe their existence to an ornamental design of Burns' friend, Gavin Hamilton, the Mauchline lawyer, who had leased the farm from the Earl of Loudoun, and built there a small cottage, with the intention of occupying it in summer. Tiring of his farm diversion he sublet Mossgiel to the Burns family.

The present two-storey farmhouse as well as the farm buildings date from the latter half of the nineteenth century; but the tall hedge in front of the house is much older than it and was probably planted by Gavin Hamilton. The older trees round the farm were evidently in existence before his time; and under one of them Burns is said to have been accustomed to recline. The farmhouse occupied by the Burns family was the two-roomed cottage erected by Gavin Hamilton. It was, doubtless, a more comfortable dwelling than most of the farmhouses of the

THE AULD AYRSHIRE

period; but its accommodation was so limited that Burns himself took up his quarters with the ploughman in the bothy, which—as is still by no means uncommon in Scotland—was a mere loft above the stable. This stable loft was the only literary workshop of the poet during the most fertile period of his muse. There after his day's labour in the fields or in the barn, he elaborated and wrote out the verses which had been assuming a rude shape in his mind during the day; and it is said he was accustomed to test their euphony and effectiveness of expression by causing his ploughman companion to read to him any stanzas about which he was in doubt.

The Mossgiel farm did not turn out a better bargain than the two previous farms occupied by the family. While at Lochlea, Burns in a letter to his Montrose cousin wrote: 'We'—the Ayrshire farmers in general—'are much at a loss for want of proper methods of farming'; and the family had not improved in their methods by the time they leased Mossgiel, which, if anything, was more difficult to work, according to the old methods, than Lochlea.

The soil was naturally no better, and since the situation was higher and more exposed, harvests were even later; and late seasons often meant the almost total loss of the corn crops. Unfortunately, also, in the one case from bad seed, and the other from bad weather, Burns had two unsuccessful harvests to start with. Of his second harvest we have a glimpse in his 'Third Epistle to Lapraik,' dated 13th September 1785.

Clearly he refers to his own experience when he writes:

' May Boreas never thrash your rigs,
Nor kick your rickles aff their legs,
Sendin' the stuff o'er muirs an' hagg
Like drivin' wrack!' etc.

And he goes on:

' I'm bizzie too, an' skelpin' at it;
But bitter, daudin' showers hae wat
it,' etc.

So he sets himself down, in devil-ma-care fashion, to write a convivial rhyming epistle to Lapraik, until his jovial stanzas are cut short by a slight clearance in the weather:

' But stooks are cowpit wi' the blast,
And now the sinn keeks in the wast;

MARY MORISON'S HOUSE, MAUCHLINE

From a Painting by Monro S. Orr

O MARY, at thy window be !

It is the wish'd, the trysted hour.

Those smiles and glances let me see,

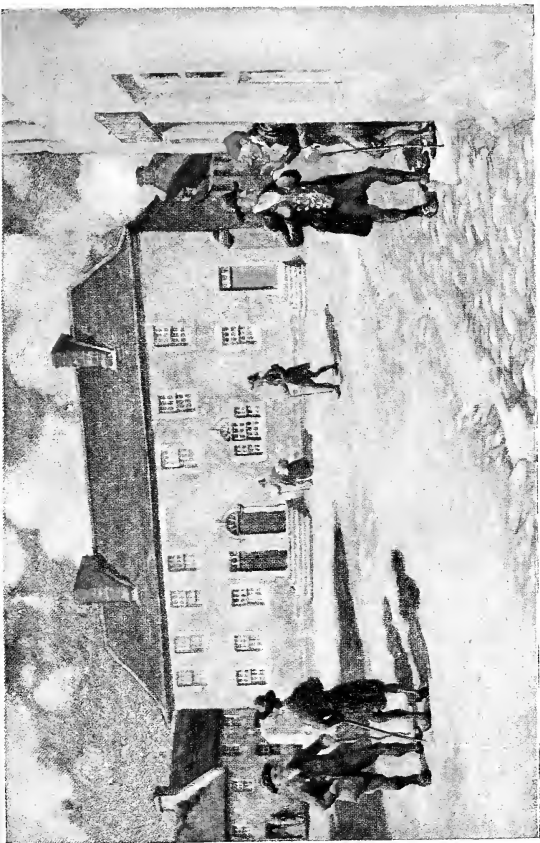
That make the miser's treasure poor :

How blithely wad I bide the stoure,

A weary slave frae sun to sun,

Could I the rich reward secure,

The lovely Mary Morison !'



Then I maun rin amang the rest,
 An' quat my chanter;
 Sae I subscribe mysel' in haste,
 Yours, Rab the Ranter.'

Four days later, 17th September, he began his 'Epistle to Macmath':

'While at the stook the shearers
 cow'r
 To shun the bitter blaudin' show'r,
 Or, in gulravage rinnin', scow'r,
 To pass the time,
 To you I dedicate the hour
 In idle rhyme.'

And from the length, and elaborate character of the epistle, we may infer that he was, on that day, uninterrupted by any clearance of the weather, and that 'the bitter blaudin' show'r' continued to beat till evening on the doomed corn.

Burns thus by irretrievable misfortunes lost both the impetus and the wherewithal to make any experiments in improved methods of farming; and notwithstanding the considerateness of Gavin Hamilton, who, however, be it remembered, had his own rent to pay, the family would have found themselves in a more hopeless position than ever, but for the pecuniary suc-

cess that ultimately attended Robert's publishing adventure.

When Burns was elaborating in his stable loft the masterpieces of Scottish verse that were to win him sudden fame throughout Ayrshire and Scotland, his worldly outlook was darkening rather than improving. There had been no real break to him in the old, monotonous drudgery, which had been his lot since childhood; and the hope of deliverance from it, or mitigation of it by improved prospects as a farmer, seemed to be receding farther from him than ever. But he was not a man whose thoughts and acts were determined by quite ordinary considerations. Success as a farmer would, of course, have been a delightful experience to him. It might have made him in several respects another man; but he was now entertaining hopes and ambitions beyond farming; and should he, as began to seem more than likely, have, from lack of a better paying occupation in Scotland, to become a 'poor negro-driver' in the West Indies, he deemed that he would be sufficiently consoled for his misfortunes could he win Scotland's approbation as a poet. '*Pauvre*

inconnu,' he writes, shortly after his Edinburgh triumph, 'as I then was, I had pretty nearly as high an idea of myself and of my works as I have at this moment.' His adverse worldly circumstances in no degree affected his intellectual and poetical vitality, except by way of quickening it. It is more than likely that had he, at this time, possessed good prospects of success as a farmer, he would not have achieved such immediately splendid success as a poet. At anyrate, the character and cast of much of the poetry he now wrote had evidently a connection with what he describes as the oversetting of his wisdom. The oversetting he attributes to his two unsuccessful years of farming at Mossgiel; but in his Autobiography he is often rather mixed in his chronology; probably he did not wait the result of the second harvest before seeking consolation in his old diversions. But, however that may be, while his rhyming was partly a solace for his worldly troubles, the oversetting of his wisdom was, as it happened, of no inconsiderable advantage to him as a poetic artist. Moralise over the failings of Burns as we may, we cannot but admit

that he turned them to effective poetic account. Had he been more reputable as a man, he could hardly have been so peculiarly irresistible as a poet. Indeed, but for his varied amatory enterprises, and the increasing development of his jovial tendencies, we might not have had the remarkable poetic outburst which is the peculiar glory of the Mossgiel period ; and certainly what poetry he might have written would have lacked some of the most special qualities of that which he actually wrote. But, in fact, speculation about other possibilities is vain ; we have to accept Burns, both man and poet, as he is, recognising that if he had peculiar weaknesses they were also associated with other special traits that have won him the affection and admiration of the world.

Never was there poetry more representative than that of Burns of the actual character of the poet's life. If in form he in a manner echoed other versifiers, in substance he recorded what he himself had seen and experienced. Whatever his themes and however they were suggested, they were coloured in his verse by his own unmistakable personality. He exhibited

himself in most of his passing moods and in nearly all the aspects of his character. He was ever making a clean breast of it to the world. Thus his verse is not unfrequently at war with convention; it sometimes expresses sentiments of which moralists would disapprove; its passion and emotion are occasionally lawless; though often admirable in its grasp of reality and its exposure of what is mean and false, there are times when it ceases to conform to right reason, and to exhibit a just sense of propriety; but it hardly ever fails to ring true to himself except when it lapses into sentimental English. It is human to the core, and it could hardly have been so variedly and penetratingly human—for his nature would not have been so deeply and variously touched—as it was, had he been the pattern personality which some of his too foolishly fond admirers would wish to persuade themselves that he must have been.

Much of the verse written by Burns at this time represents his observations and experiences in the village of Mauchline. Mauchline became a much more important factor in his life than Tarbolton ever was,

and it bulks more largely in his poetry. The young women criticised in 'The Tarbolton Lasses' were not the village young women, but certain farmers' daughters in the parish; whereas 'The Mauchline Belles' introduces us to the more celebrated toasts of the Mauchline village. 'Death and Dr Hornbook', it is true, may fairly be regarded as a Tarbolton idyll, and the same village is in a manner associated with the masonic 'Farewell' and the vapid 'No Churchman am I': but Tarbolton imparts but little of its own flavour to any of these effusions, whereas such masterpieces as 'The Holy Fair', 'The Jolly Beggars', and 'Holy Willie's Prayer' are redolent of Mauchline from beginning to end. In addition to this, while his Mauchline experiences inspire and colour his verse in many indirect ways, it contains many passing allusions to the burgh, and several amusing thumb-nail sketches of its personalities such as those of Adam Armour, John Dove, John Humphrey, and James Smith, to name no more.

This superior poetical predominance of Mauchline to Tarbolton was inevitable by

reason of the fact that the Mossgiel period was one of much more poetical productiveness than that of Lochlea, or indeed any other period of his life. With this productiveness the oversetting of his wisdom had, as we have seen, a good deal to do; and the oversetting of his wisdom meant pretty constant errands, amatory or convivial, to Mauchline. Besides Mauchline was much nearer to Mossgiel than Tarbolton was to Lochlea. It faced him in the lower grounds near the woods but a short mile away; and if he stepped out of doors after supper on a starry or moonlight night or a fine summer evening, the desire of distraction from his worldly cares, or relief from the monotony of his round of toil, would strongly reinforce the amatory or social impulses, that made him almost instinctively direct his strolling footsteps towards the burgh. There in that ancient, dull-looking, old-world country town 'lay his game.' There were to be found the amatory diversions and the social distractions which were most readily accessible to him. His mistresses and his more constant male associates and intimates belonged to a comparatively humble

rank in life. The peer in intellectual and social gifts of any of his contemporaries, and, peasant though he was, able to lord it in general conversation in any company, he was dependent for his social hours on persons who, shrewd and intelligent though they might be within their own sphere of observation and experience, were for the most part plain, ordinary tradesmen or mechanics or peasant farmers, without any particular refinement in their tastes or manners, and rather unaccustomed to that species of social intercourse termed intellectual conversation. But to Burns humanity of every grade and class was a constant source of interest; the humours of even the lowest and most vulgar company were matters to him of lively curiosity; and being a professional student of human nature he never failed to find his social hours instructive as well as pleasant.

Mauchline, whatever may have been the case in the eighteenth century, bears, now, little or no resemblance, in outward aspect, to Tarbolton. Yet it is by no means a busy-looking place, and is distinguished by none of the tall chimneys which are

the usual ornamental signals of modern industry. The main streets branching off from the cross have the dull, empty appearance characteristic of smaller towns in the agricultural districts, the main daily happenings being, apparently, the passing of a tooting motor-car, or a swift cyclist with his eyes intent on his machine or the road in front of him. The monotonous lines of the plain two-storey houses are relieved by very few shops; and only the glimpse of an occasional peeping female in a doorway, or the appearance at long intervals of solitary male personages on quite inexplicable errands, contradicts the plausible hypothesis that in bright noontide the inhabitants have all gone to bed. The explanation is that while the men are mostly busy in the box-making shops or the red-sandstone quarries, the elder children are at the board schools, and the women occupied with their household duties, or gossiping indoors.

As a matter of fact, Mauchline is quite a thriving place, as is attested by constant additions to the rows of neat red-sandstone cottages, with bright flower beds in the outskirts of the town, and the pleasant-

THE AULD AYRSHIRE

looking villas that peep out here and there from amongst the woods. There are not, as in Tarbolton, any signs of a hopeless struggle with a too adverse fate, no tumbling walls, no ancient thatched cottages of quite woebegone ruinous aspect, no empty dwellings with boarded-up windows and roofs half fallen in. The main streets have a quite presentable if not very spruce appearance; and the houses, if not quite modern, have, most of them, been entirely renovated since the days of Burns. The steady, if moderate, prosperity of the place, has, indeed, tended almost entirely to efface its eighteenth century similitude. Almost the only existing relics of the poet's connexion with it are the room—in a now somewhat dilapidated-looking two-storey thatched house—which was a 'convenient harbour,' for Jean Armour, when he decided at last to marry her; the dwelling of Adjutant Morison; Gavin Hamilton's house, hard by the kirkyard, and adjoining an old tower, the remains of a priory established in Mauchline in the twelfth century for the monks of Melrose; and the kirkyard itself, which, moreover, is in part peopled by the poet's

own contemporaries, and holds the bones of most of the Mauchline personalities enshrined in his verse. Some of his own children were buried in the Armour lairs before he left for Dumfries. The 'lovely Mary Morison,' a victim, like the 'heavenly' Miss Burnet, of consumption, is here commemorated as having died '29 June 1791, aged 20.' Here also 'sleeps' Gavin Hamilton, whom 'canting wretches,' and especially 'Holy Willie,' 'blamed'; and not far away is the 'last abode' of Holy Willie's own 'sair-worn clay.' The Rev. William Auld is honoured by a memorial stone appropriate to his position as pastor of the parish; and, with a like regard to the fitness of things, Agnes Gibson—'Poosie Nansie'—with her daughter, 'Racer Jess,' repose side by side in an unobtrusive neuk. The ancient, mean structure of Burns' time, which superseded the kirk, with 'a tabernacle beautiful to the eye,' to which the reformer Wishart was denied entrance, has been replaced by quite a typical Scottish country parish kirk of the earlier nineteenth-century fashion—a plain Gothic building with a square turreted tower; and otherwise the sur-

roundings of the kirkyard are very different from what they were when they resounded to the tent oratory of 'The Holy Fair.'

Regarding that immortal satire it may be a sufficient answer to the objections urged by the 'unco guid' to its mocking spirit, that here, as in all his descriptive verse that counts, Burns was a realist and not a caricaturist, and that the description does no violence to the facts. The holy fair he depicted was the holy fair as it actually appeared to one who knew it thoroughly. The successive diets of oratory and their interludes are described by him in terms as exactly accordant as possible with his own opinion of them. Where there is exaggeration, it is the exaggeration essential to effectively descriptive art. Thus we are really not asked to believe that the stentorian shouts of Black Russel did actually awaken the echoes of the hills; we are only compelled to realise that his voice was something very tremendous, which according to all accounts it was. Nor need we quite credit that some of the half-asleep rustics were, through the stertorous snoring of a

neighbour, induced to imagine in their dreams that they were nearing the roaring of hell-fire; though the snoring may have been of a somewhat startling character, and their ludicrously alarmed appearance on awakening may well have been altogether consistent with the poet's humorous hypothesis. What humorous exaggeration there may be in the satire is but the quite legitimate artifice of a great artist who wishes to impress the scene with sufficient vividness on the reader's imagination. It is also vain to object that the satire savours of blasphemy; for the blasphemy belonged rather to the fair than to the poet's account of it; and there is even good reason to believe that the satire had more than a little to do with the discontinuance of 'occasions' which had gradually assimilated too many of the holiday characteristics of the Scottish fairs. Also, though the oratory might often be well meant and for the most part accordant with the convictions of the speakers, this did not save it from being absurd from the point of view of Burns; and his duty as an artist was to reveal its absurdity in the most effective

terms of his art. As for the audience, Burns appraised its various human ingredients as only a peasant genius could have done, and his picture of its foolish old-world mixture of the flesh and the spirit is one of his most finished masterpieces. From the time that we see them as a lively picturesque crowd hurrying down the hill on the bright Sunday morning to the burgh kirkyard—spruce farmers ambling on their nags, and humble cottars in their ‘Sunday’s best’ on foot, ‘swankies young in braw braid-claith,’ and barefit lasses glittering in ‘silks and scarlets’—each successive scene of, so to speak, their day’s entertainment, secular and sacred, is shown us with resistless kaleidoscopic vividness.

Of the old change-houses that were then filled ‘but and ben’ with ‘yill-caup commentators’ none now remain. Even auld Nanse Tinnock’s, which had a back entrance to the yard, and in which on weekdays Burns himself, according to his own account, sometimes studied politics ‘over a glass of gude auld Scotch drink,’ is no longer a public; and the site of the Whitefoord Arms—then the principal inn of the

place, and, doubtless, on a Holy Fair occasion frequented, as on other Sundays and other fair days, rather by the 'farmers gash' than by their cottars—is now occupied by a general store. Here Burns presided at the gatherings of those young amatory revolutionists who termed themselves 'The Court of Equity'; and here, also, he was accustomed to meet his more well-to-do acquaintances. Thus he writes to Factor Kennedy:

'But, as I'm sayin', please step to Dow's,
 An' taste sic gear as Johnnie brews,' etc.
 John Dowie or Dove, the landlord of the Whitefoord Arms, was evidently a jovial host of a quite secular type, who cared nothing for 'holy fairs' except for the custom they brought him:

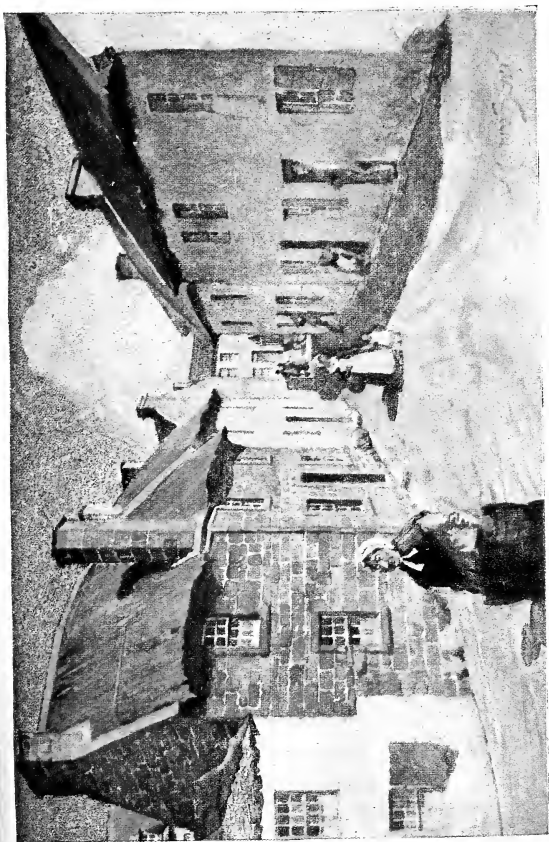
'What was his religion,
 Whae'er desires to ken,
 To some other warl'
 Maun follow the carl,

For here Johnnie Pigeon had nane!'
 While these two inns are now no more, the words 'Poosie Nansie's Hostelry, the Beggars' Houf,' confronts us in large capitals on the gable of a house at the kirkyard end of the Cowgate. But, as we

NANSE TINNOCK'S

From a Painting by Monroe S. Orr

'TELL yon guid bluid of auld Boconnock's,
I'll be his debt twa mashlum bonnocks,
An' drink his health in auld Nanse Tinnock's,
Nine times a-week,
If he some scheme, like tea an' winnocks,
Wad kindly seek.'



have seen, 'Poosie Nansie' now reposes in the kirkyard; and, though doubtless stray vagrants are still able to find in the burgh the accommodation suited to their special tastes and means, vagrancy is not now the remunerative profession that it was. The picturesque ragamuffins who are introduced to us as holding their 'splore' in Nansie's houf—the crippled mendicant soldier with his cuts and scars, attended with his martial chuck of ancient regimental notoriety, the pygmean fiddler, the capering Merry Andrew, the sturdy caird, the guzzling tinkler-hizzie, the 'raucelin' beggar-woman (who could thieve as well as beg, and for her patronage of whom, probably, 'Poosie Nansie' got into trouble as a 'fencer' of stolen goods), the limping, dissolute bard and his dissolute dame—these were types of a period when mendicancy, direct or indirect, was one of the recognised institutions of the country. All these different varieties of the profession were after their own fashion remunerative; but even when the fraternity held high festival they were by no means particular as to the appointments of the banqueting chamber. In 'Poosie Nansie's'

parlour and sleeping-chamber combined, neither chairs nor beds were seemingly allowed the guests. The jolly company of roysterers squatted promiscuously on the floor, contemptuously disregarding of civilised conveniences, and quite indifferent to the raids of fleas from chicken cavies. The present establishment, on the other hand, is quite modern and up-to-date in its appointments. It preserves few of the special features of the old 'houf.' While occupying the veritable site of the old hostelry, it bears no particular resemblance to it. On the contrary it specially caters for family parties of quite doucely inclined Burnsites, whose favourite feast is presumably a high tea ; and in edifying disregard of the traditions of the house its banqueting-chamber is adorned with a framed and illustrated copy, not of the splendid cantata which has conferred on this anciently squalid corner of the burgh immortal remembrance, but of the highly exemplary production, dear to Scottish piety, 'The Cotter's Saturday Night.'

Of course not only Mauchline but nearly all its neighbourhood is more or less as-

sociated with the name of Burns. The memories of him have quite eclipsed the memories of Reformers and Covenanters. As we enter the burgh from Mossgiel we pass, on the right, the gate to Nether-place, on the then mistress of which Burns was moved—probably from some supposed offence—to publish certain peculiarly bitter diatribes; but happily his other verses associated with the beautiful country near Mauchline are more in harmony with its character. The ‘wild romantic groves’ of Barskimming are with its owner, the ‘aged judge,’ Lord Miller, commemorated in a fine stanza of ‘The Vision’; and the ‘Stately Lugar,’ which winds through its grounds to the Ayr, was evidently one of his favourite streams. Nearer to the town was one of his special haunts, the ‘braes of Ballochmyle’ where, doubtless, soon after the arrival of the new owners of the estate, he chanced to spy the ‘lovely Wilhelmina Alexander,’ whose charms immediately on his return home he set himself to celebrate in rather mannered verses of the semi-English variety. Beyond Ballochmyle are Catrine woods:

‘The Catrine woods were yellow seen

The flowers decayed on Catrine lea.’

Thus the poet begins his lament for the hard fate of the Whitefoords in being compelled to part with their ancestral estate of Ballochmyle. The mansion-house of Catrine belonged to Professor Dugald Stewart, who inherited it from his father, and usually spent a portion of his summer there:

‘Learning and worth in simple measure trode

From simple Catrine, their long-loved abode.’

In the village of Ochiltree, the hills of which parish faced him to the southward from Mossgiel, Burns found a congenial friend in the schoolmaster, ‘Winsome Willie,’ who also essayed the Muse; and later by his amorous escapades he attracted the attention of Tam Walker, the rhyming tailor of the village, to whom he addressed the indecorous ‘Reply’ beginning:

‘What ails ye now, ye lousie bitch,

To thrash my back at sic a pitch?’

A little beyond the village is also Glenconner, then leased by the Tennants, who

were special friends of the Burns' family :

‘Auld comrade dear, and brother sinner,
How’s a’ the folk about Glenconner?’

Thus Burns began his rather mixed epistle to one of the sons.

With Kilmarnock, the weaving and market-town some seven miles northward of Mossgiel, our Bard, as the years went on, came to have more and more intimate relations. At this time, and mainly through the enterprise of Lord Glencairn, it was beginning to assume something of its present aspect, its narrow, confused streets and lanes, and neuks of low, thatched, weavers' cottages having been lately supplemented by a new street, after the modern fashion of that time, running southward along the Riccarton road; while a great impetus had been given to its prosperity by the introduction of an additional form of weaving—that of carpets. The bulk of its inhabitants were then engaged in weaving and in the boot and shoemaking trade. It was thus a principal focus of the anti-patronage movement in Ayrshire; and the Laigh Kirk Congregation had been involved in a famous disputed settlement, which dragged on for about ten

THE AULD AYRSHIRE

years—from 1763 to 1774. Similar violent opposition was made to the settlement of an obnoxious presentee in 1785, with the result that Mackinlay, a ‘great favourite of the million,’ finally got appointed. This great triumph for the Kilmarnock wabsters and soúters is the theme of mock celebration by Burns in ‘The Ordination’:

‘Kilmarnock wabsters, fidge an’ claw,
An’ pour your creeshie nations;
An’ ye wha leather rax an’ draw,
Of a’ denominations;
Swith! to the Laigh Kirk, ane an’ a’,
An’ there tak up your stations;
Then aff to Begbie’s in a raw,
An’ pour divine libations
For joy this day.’

Previous to writing ‘The Ordination’ Burns had in ‘The Twa Herds’ made great sport of a remarkable scene in the Ayr Presbytery between two leaders of the Evangelicals, Black Russel, minister of the High Kirk, Kilmarnock, and Alexander Moodie of the neighbouring parish of Riccarton, who were at loggerheads as to the boundaries of their respective parishes. By such remarkably outspoken and clever productions on the burning

questions of the day, he leapt into fame as the recognised laureate of the New Light party; and on the occasions—which latterly became pretty frequent—when, bold, burly, and humorous, he rode on his ‘weel-gaun fillie’ along the crooked, narrow, and shabby streets of the weaving burgh, he was doubtless the observed of many not quite friendly observers.

These two pieces, with ‘Holy Willie’s Prayer’ and ‘The Holy Fair’ conferred on Burns a rhyming fame throughout Stewart Kyle such as he could not have won by the sublimest odes and the most touching love lyrics. They were topical from beginning to end and topical with a vengeance. Ecclesiastical matters were the chief topics of the time, and excitement about them was then running very high. As he himself mentions, ‘the hue and cry against patronage was then at its worst’; and this meant that the two great parties in the Kirk were then in a condition of acute mutual irritation. From the very nature of the case ecclesiastical disputes tend to generate a peculiar bitterness; for each party deems itself in a manner bound to consider the other sinfully in the wrong.

POOSIE NANSIE'S AT MAUCHLINE

From a Painting by Monro S. Orr

'WHEN lyart leaves bestrew the yird,
Or wavering like the banckie-bird,
Bedim could Boreas' blast ;
When hailstones drive wi' bitter skyte,
And infant frosts begin to bite,
In hoary cranreuch drest ;
Ae night, at e'en, a merry core
O' randie, gangrel bodies,
In Poesie Nancie's held the splore,
To drink their orra duddies ;
Wi' quaffing and laughing,
They ranted an' they sang,
Wi' jumping and thumping,
The vera girdle rang.'



With widening intelligence religious toleration has among many Christians come to be recognised as a kind of Christian virtue; but this, even yet, is recognised more in theory than in practice; and amongst what Burns termed 'the gloomy, fiery' Presbyterians of his day—especially the 'Old Light' party—it was deemed rather a vice than a virtue. As for Burns he could not in the least tolerate the intolerance of that party. 'I ever could ill endure,' he writes, 'those surly cubs of "chaos and old night."' His satires against them abounded, therefore, in personalities; and the personal allusions were selected with a skill, and expressed with a condensed felicity, a vigorous directness, and a graphic wit that were irresistible. He thus at once became a marked man in the ecclesiastical community—feared as much as he was hated by the one party, while by the other his satires were read with shouts of applause and roars of laughter. This local ecclesiastical fame did much to secure an immediate sale for his poems, which, as all the world knows, were first published at Kilmarnock in 1786. But, indeed, for the fact that he was able to

obtain the security of some of the well-to-do laymen of the New Light party he could not—virtually penniless as he then was—have succeeded in finding anyone to undertake the publication of his book; and of course few, or none, of the other party were named amongst his subscribers. Amongst the keenest supporters of the publishing scheme was John Goldie or Goudie, wine merchant in Kilmarnock, an accomplished student of science, as well as a learned and advanced theologian, whom Burns addresses as :

‘Goudie, terror o’ the Whigs,
Dread o’ black coats and reverend
wigs.’

And of course another of his great friends was the popular Tam Samson, a flourishing nurseryman and seedsman, and in his leisure hours a jolly Freemason and convivialist, a roaring curler, a clever fisher, a noted sportsman on the moors, and in the opinion of Burns and many more the prince of good fellows. With these and similar friends, including Robert Muir, Major Parker and his brother Hugh, and other obscure worthies known or unknown to tradition, Burns had evidently

much jovial intercourse in 'Auld Killie'; and in 1786 he was made an honorary member of the Kilwinning St John's Lodge of Freemasons, Kilmarnock, of which Major Parker was Grand Master. Though the town has been practically rebuilt since the poet's time, and has greatly overflowed its old boundaries, the enthusiastic Burns pilgrim—after an inspection of the relics and manuscripts in the tasteful monumental erection in the Kay Park—may find gratification in still discovering a few mementoes in the town relating to the poet or his writings. The attic where his poems were put through the press, the house of Tam Samson, the tower of the Laigh Kirk—though the kirk itself has been rebuilt—still exist in a manner as they were in the poet's days; but 'Begbie's' of the devout wabsters and souters has been rebuilt and, it may be for some obscure religious reason, is now named The Angel Hotel. In the Laigh Kirk burying-ground may be seen the tombstone of Tam Samson, with a verse from the anticipatory classic elegy by Burns; and not far from it is that of the 'Robertson harangue nae mair' of 'The Ordination,' who

was minister of the first charge, and also that of Mackinlay, minister of the second charge, the Evangelical hero of the same poem and 'The Simple James' of 'The Kirk's Alarm.'

With his visit to Edinburgh the poet's connection with Ayrshire practically ceased; and Dumfriesshire did not play the same part in his poetry as Ayrshire did. It is mainly as a writer of epigrams and epitaphs and political squibs and ballads and several lyrics—the majority not in his best vein—that his name is specially associated with the county of his adoption; and the scene of even the chief poem of the Dumfries period, 'Tam o' Shanter,' is laid in Ayrshire. We have no such racy sketches of Dumfriesshire scenes, rural or urban, as we have of the county where he was born and bred. This may partly be accounted for by the consideration that his poetic pen was in a manner fettered by his position as exciseman; but in any case the fact remains that, apart from his songs, he may be regarded as mainly and distinctively the poet of Ayrshire. Ayrshire, for good or evil, made him largely what he was, and though some of his

more notable lyrics were written after he left it he did not find in his new surroundings the inspiration for any set of verses at all comparable to his great Ayrshire masterpieces.

INDEX TO AULD AYRSHIRE



	PAGE
AIKEN, ROBERT	31
Alexander, Wilhelmina	131
Alloway	40, 51
Armour, Adam	118
Armour, Jean	88, 122
Auld, Rev. William	123
'Auld Farmer, The'	15
Ayr	28, 33
— Auld Brig o'	36-39
Ayrshire	3
 BACHELORS' CLUB, THE	 88, 92
Ballantine, John	31
Ballochmyle	131
Ballochniel	67
Barskimming	131
Begbie, Elison	105
Begbie's	134, 139
Brown Carrick Hill	46
Brown, Richard	105, 122
Brown, Samuel	67
Burnet, Miss	123
Burns, Robert, birth of	1
— Circumstances of	2
— Time of	4
— Peculiar opportunity	10
— Peasanthood	11
— Indebted to environment	11
— Allusions to nature	12
— 'Auld Farmer'	14
— The poet of Ayrshire	21
— References to Coila	23, 25
— Allusions to the sea	26
— Connection with Ayr	28
— Acquaintance in	30
— His interest in nature	49
— Schooldays of	51
— Worldly prospects of	52
— Life at Mount Oliphant	54
— At Dalrymple School	60

INDEX TO AULD AYRSHIRE

	PAGE
Burns, Robert—Acquaintanceship with surrounding country	61
— Visit to Kirkoswald	66
— Flirtation with Peggy Thomson	69
— At Lochlea	76
— Love affairs	79
— Social intercourse	83
— Forms the Bachelors' Club	88
— Becomes a Freemason	93
— Dandyism	97
— Flirtations	98
— Highland Mary episode	99
— Doctrinal talks	100
— Song on Saunders Tait	103
— Visit to Irvine	105
— At Mossgiel	108
— Lack of success as farmer	110
— Oversetting of his wisdom	115
— Poetic outburst	116
— Connection with Mauchline	117
— Social intimates	120
— His 'Holy Fair'	124
— At Kilmarnock	133
— Ecclesiastical satires	136
— Publication of poems	137
— Kilmarnock supporters and friends	138
— The poet of Ayrshire rather than Dumfries	140
Burns, William	53, 73, 78
— Death of	106
— Mrs William	78
CAMPBELL, MARY	100
Candlish, James	60
Cassilis, Countess of	63
Cassilis, Earl of	63
Cassilis Downans, The	61
Chalmers, Willie	31
Coila	23, 24, 25
Coilsfield	99
Cottage, The. See Alloway.	
'Court of Equity,' The	127
Culzean Castle	62
Cumnock Hills	33
Currie, Dr	42, 53

INDEX TO AULD AYRSHIRE

	PAGE
DALRYMPLE, REV. WILLIAM	29
Dancing	83
Davidson, John	71
'Death and Dr Hornbook'	73, 95
Doon, The	50, 51
Doon, The Brig of	39, 45
Doonholm	47
Dowie, or Dove, John	118, 127
'FAA, JOHNNY'	63
Fail, The	74
Failford	101
Freemasonry	93
GIBSON, AGNES	123
Glenconner	132
Goldie, John	137
Graham, Douglas	71
HAMILTON, GAVIN	109, 122, 123
'Highland Mary'	99
'Holy Fair, The'	124
'Holy Willie'	123
Humphrey, John	118
IRVINE	105
KENNEDY, FACTOR JOHN	127
Kilmarnock	133
Kilpatrick, Allan	61
— Nellie	61
Kilwinning, St John's Lodge	138
Kirk, authority of the	4
Kirkoswald	66-72
Knox, John	66
Kyle. See Coila.	
LAIGH KIRK	133, 138
Lapraik, John	111
Lochlea	28, 73, 103, 106
Logan, Major	31
M'CANDLISH, JAMES	60
Macgill, Dr William	29
Mackinlay, Rev. John	134, 139
'Macmath, Gude'	103

INDEX TO AULD AYRSHIRE

	PAGE
M'Taggart, Helen	71
Mauchline	117, 120
— Kirkyard	122-3
Maybole	65
Miller of Barskimming, Lord	131
Montgomery Castle	99
Montgomery's Peggy	99
Morison, Mary	123
Moodie, Rev. Alexander	134
Moore, Dr	30
Mossgiel	108
Mount Oliphant	51-72
Muir, Robert	138
— William	87
Murdoch, John	45, 51
 NETHERPLACE	 131
Niven, William	65
 OCHILTREE	 122, 132
'Old Light' Party	136
'Ordination, The'	134
 PARKER, HUGH	 137
— Major	137
Peacock, partner of Burns	106
Perclewan	59
Poosie Nansie's	127
 'RACER JESS'	 123
Ramsay, Allan	10
— of Ochtert tyre	29
Rankine, John	87
Robertson, Rev. John	138
Rocking	85
'Russel, Black'	124, 134
 ST DAVID'S LODGE	 93
St James's Lodge	94, 108
Samson, Tam	138
Sillar, David	87, 89
Simson, William	130
Smith, of Mauchline, Miss	60
— James	118
Stewart, Professor Dugald	132

INDEX TO AULD AYRSHIRE

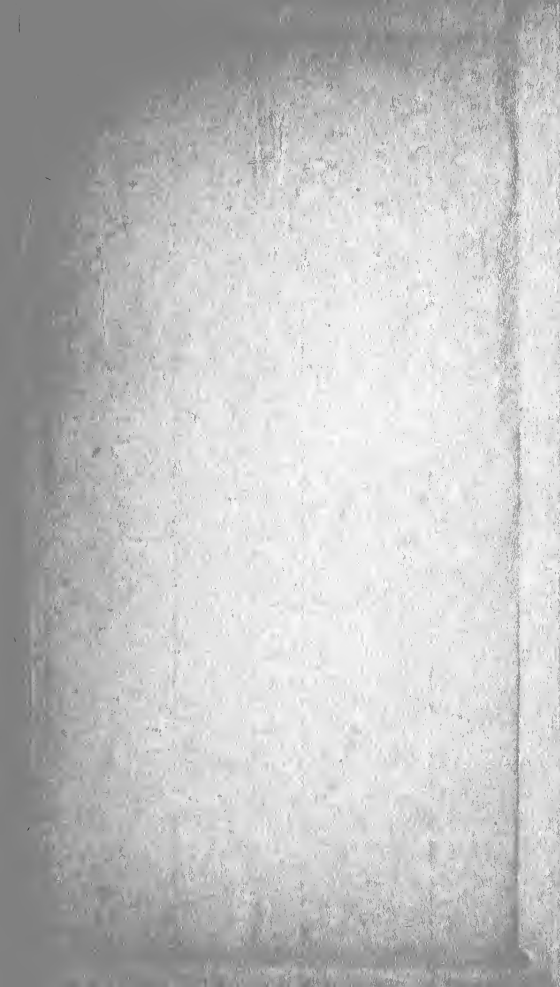
	PAGE
TAIT, SAUNDERS	103, 107
'Tam o' Shanter,' originals of	35
Tarbolton	93, 108
Tennants of Glenconner	132
Thomson, Peggy	69, 71
Tinnock's, Nanse	126, 129
Turnberry	72
'Twa Herds, The'	132
WALKER, SAM	132
Whitefoord Arms, The	126
Willie's Mill	73
Wilson, John	95
Wishart, George	123
'Wodrow, Auld'	102

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